

Parental leave and workload relief policies: navigating discrepancies across faculty ranks, types, and genders

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Abstract

This paper calls attention to disparities in parental leave and workload relief policies for non-tenure-track (NTT) faculty, highlighting the need for the equitable creation of more family-friendly caregiving policies. While tenure-track (TT) faculty are typically guaranteed leave benefits and workload reductions, support for NTT faculty, who now comprise a majority of classroom instructors, is often inconsistent and inadequate, impacting their personal well-being, professional stability, and, ultimately, student learning. This inequity is particularly pronounced for women and gender-nonconforming faculty, who disproportionately bear caregiving responsibilities. Taking a case study approach, this paper examines the current state of parental leave and workload relief policies at the University of Pennsylvania, where 62% of instructors are NTT faculty. We analyze the existing policies, identify key disparities between TT and NTT faculty, and discuss the challenges of implementing equitable policies across diverse departments, schools, and faculty roles. By addressing these disparities, universities can improve faculty well-being, enhance gender equity, and create a more sustainable and productive academic environment for all.

Background

Faculty at most universities are made up of a variety of full-time, part-time, and adjunct roles and include tenured and tenure track (TT) and non-tenure track (NTT) positions. The number of adjunct faculty in the United States has significantly increased in recent decades - the increase has even led to coining the term "adjunctification" as a descriptor of the growing reliance on NTT faculty [1]. In 2021, two-thirds of all faculty members at U.S. universities held contingent appointments, a stark contrast to fewer than half in 1987 [2]. This trend has led to a decline in TT positions, with 24% of faculty members holding such positions in 2021, down from 39% in 1987.

The growing dependence on NTT faculty has not resulted in corresponding levels of compensation or institutional support. Research through the Harvard Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education initiative and others demonstrates that NTT faculty are paid 25% less than their TT peers while lacking the protections of tenure [3]. Recommendations dictate that benefit packages offered to full-time NTT faculty should correspond to those available to TT faculty [3], [4], but a quick glance through most university websites shows this is often not the case. Although many features of NTT faculty employment are problematic [5], our focus is on disparities around caregiving support - specifically parental leave and workload relief policies.

Despite their critical roles in teaching, mentoring, and research, NTT faculty are often excluded from benefits offered to TT faculty, including parental leave and workload relief policies. The lack of equitable parental leave and workload relief policies for NTT faculty is a pressing issue that undermines gender equity, faculty well-being, and classroom learning, and is increasingly driving faculty out of academe [6]. Inequities in these policies or their interpretations exacerbate gender disparities, as caregiving responsibilities are often shouldered by women and gender-nonconforming individuals [7], [8]. These issues are exacerbated in STEM fields where women are already underrepresented [9], to the point that the National Academies recently issued a call to action to better support family caregivers in STEM fields [10]. The inconsistent and frequently subjective implementation of parental leave policies for NTT faculty contributes to financial strain, emotional stress, and professional instability. It forces NTT faculty to make impossible choices between their careers and their families, and reduces their ability to plan courses and conduct research.

In contrast, family-friendly policies improve employee well-being and morale [11], reduce turnover [12], and help recruit top talent [13]. Without guaranteed teaching relief, the semester and student learning are disrupted. If faculty are forced to return to work too soon, they don't have the resources to support their students. By committing to the well-being of its NTT faculty, universities enhance their reputations as employers and create a more stable and productive environment for multiple stakeholders, including students, staff, administrators, and faculty.

At most universities, parental leave and workload relief policies typically include several different types of **leave**, **relief**, and/or contract term extensions. These are usually divided into those administered by Human Resources (Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA), paid parental leave, short-term disability for the birth parent) and others administered by Faculty Affairs (workload relief, extensions to appointment terms for NTT faculty or tenure probationary periods for TT faculty). **Leaves** are often defined as periods of time for which no work for the university should be expected, while **relief** might include either partial or full relief from teaching for a semester or more, while other service, research, or administrative work continues.

As a case study, this paper describes the current efforts to eliminate discrepancies between TT and NTT faculty regarding parental leave and workload relief policies at the University of Pennsylvania (Penn), where NTT faculty constitute 62% of the university's instructors. Ideally, this provides a framework for others engaging in similar efforts.

Methods

The authors began by collecting all possible information about institutional policies. Methods included a review of university, school, and departmental websites and associated linked documents, and a review of the faculty handbook. Search terms included but were not limited to parental leave, maternity leave, paternity leave, teaching relief, workload relief, childcare support, teaching leave, term extensions, parental benefits, parental support, and others. This led to the determination that policies related to parental leave and teaching relief spanned both Human Resources [HR] and Faculty Affairs. When policies were unclear (or ran counter to our experiences, and those of colleagues), we requested interviews with administrators, HR staff, and members of the faculty union.

Once we had a solid grasp of university policies, we sought to gather accounts from colleagues (both TT and NTT) across the university to understand whether their experiences matched the benefits that they were eligible for. These accounts were gathered both informally through conversations with colleagues at events and other venues, and more formally through a Town Hall event the authors co-hosted.

Additionally, we are reviewing how our institution's policies compare with peer institutions. This benchmarking work allows us to articulate where we stand relative to other institutions in an effort to remain current and competitive with comprehensive benefits offered to faculty.

Results

Policies

At our institution, federal and state laws ensure that all full-time faculty employed for 12 months or more are eligible for FMLA (12 weeks of unpaid leave with continuation of benefits). All parents - staff or faculty - are also eligible for 4 weeks of paid parental leave at 100% of base salary. Additionally, birth parents typically qualify for 8 weeks of short-term disability benefits at 100% of base salary. In each case, these leaves usually run concurrently with FMLA (if elected), so a non-birth parent would get 4 of the 12 weeks paid, while a birth parent would get 12 of the 12 weeks paid.

In terms of workload relief, TT faculty receive one full semester of teaching relief for non-birth parents and two full semesters of teaching relief for birth parents. However, the only clause in the faculty handbook that applies to NTT faculty states, “Four consecutive weeks of parental leave is not always practical for faculty with responsibilities for teaching semester-long courses or the equivalent. In lieu of four consecutive weeks of paid parental leave, schools may grant faculty full semesters or the equivalent without teaching duties.” This has led to various interpretations, some of which are explained below.

Non-tenured faculty on the tenure track are eligible for an extension of the tenure probationary period of one year. There is no mention of term extensions for NTT faculty.

The exception at our institution is one of the 12 schools that offers a policy [14] that clearly defines parental leave for both TT and NTT faculty. The School of Arts and Sciences (SAS) policy includes parental leave and teaching relief for the birth parent and the spouse or partner of the birth parent. It also specifies parental leave and teaching relief for adoptive parents and extends the tenure probationary period (TT) or appointment term (NTT). In contrast to the main University policy, it also describes what happens in the case of a summer birth and explicitly lists the types of NTT faculty eligible under these policies.

Implementation

Because of the vague university-level policy on teaching relief stated above, workload relief policies for NTT faculty vary wildly. Some receive teaching relief outside of the 4-12 weeks of parental leave and short-term disability, while others do not. The likelihood of receiving teaching relief can often depend on when a birth happens: For parents whose child does not arrive at the beginning of a semester, teaching relief is often truncated, creating issues in both semesters. For parents who give birth over the summer, teaching relief is often denied altogether.

Another confounding factor is that Penn has dozens of kinds of full-time NTT faculty roles, with contract terms ranging from one to five years. Some examples include: artist-in-residence, lecturer, lecturer A, lecturer B, lecturer in foreign language, lecturer in critical writing, senior lecturer, senior lecturer in foreign language, senior lecturer in critical writing, visiting faculty, research assistant professor, research associate professor, research professor, practice assistant professor, practice associate professor, and practice professor. The range in job titles and contract terms can confound the administration of consistent policies. Moreover, workload relief for NTT faculty is typically determined on a case-by-case basis, resulting in inequity and undue burden on individual faculty members and department chairs.

In one recent example, an NTT faculty member in the School of Engineering and Applied Sciences (SEAS) gave birth in late June 2023, and was given the option to either take the full 12 weeks of FMLA (with short-term disability and paid parental leave running concurrently) and return to a full course load at the end of September, or take a single course release for the fall semester, but start teaching the other course less than 8 weeks after giving birth. This is in contrast with two NTT faculty members in SAS who were non-birth parents, with babies born in June 2024, who both received an entire semester of full teaching relief. However, despite also being eligible for term extensions equivalent to their time of teaching relief, this benefit was not extended to either faculty member. These disparities are not one-off instances but consequences of a systemic issue in providing equitable and transparent policies for NTT faculty.

It's also important to note that although parental leave policies for TT faculty are more well-established, their implementation (from teaching relief to tenure probationary period extension) can also vary. In preparing this article, we encountered TT birth parent who was initially offered one semester of teaching relief and had to advocate for the second semester of teaching relief, despite two semesters of relief for birth parents being university policy.

Additionally, many faculty don't claim FMLA, short-term disability, or even paid parental leave for various reasons, and taking advantage of these benefits is not normalized. Although workload relief and contract extensions typically fall within Faculty Affairs, there are representatives from Faculty Affairs at each of the 12 schools within Penn, and each school varies widely in their ratios of TT to NTT faculty. Therefore, in schools with fewer NTT faculty, Faculty Affairs tends to have less experience with policies that apply to NTT faculty. Additionally, it's not always clear how human resources policies interact with faculty affairs policies (see previous example of how a teaching relief negotiation resulted in a birth parent only getting 8 weeks of leave despite being eligible for 12).

Benchmarking

In our analysis of peer institutions, most Universities have standardized policies guaranteeing at least one semester of workload relief for all new parents (and often two for birth parents) for all full-time faculty. We were unable to find examples of other universities that distinguished between NTT and TT faculty in their workload relief policies for full-time faculty.

Future Goals & Progress to Date

This paper argues for the need to create more equitable policies for parental leave, teaching relief, and term extensions for NTT faculty that mirror those of TT faculty, and to normalize taking advantage of these benefits for both NTT and TT faculty. In our specific institution, this

would mean expanding the SAS policy across all schools and departments at Penn. However, even this policy doesn't address all types of NTT faculty, and leaves certain types of families at a significant disadvantage. For example:

- NTT faculty without teaching duties (e.g., research professors), while eligible for short term disability (birth parents), four weeks of paid parental leave (all parents), and FMLA (all parents), do not have any defined workload relief.
- A single NTT non-birth parent (who becomes a parent through adoption or surrogacy) would only be eligible for four weeks of paid parental leave, and would be subject to the vague workload relief policy.
- If neither member of a couple is a birth parent, and both are NTT faculty, they would each only be eligible for four weeks of paid parental leave, but only vaguely defined workload relief.
- In several of these cases, unpaid leave could be used through FMLA, but not every family can afford to take unpaid leave. Since most childcare providers don't accept infants younger than six weeks, choices for such families are limited.

Initially, it was unclear where to start when attempting to eliminate discrepancies between TT and NTT faculty regarding workload relief and contract extension policies. NTT faculty are not represented in our Faculty Senate, nor are they included as members in the Penn Forum for Women Faculty and Gender Equity. The only university-level organization that included NTT faculty at the time was the local chapter of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), which already included NTT faculty members and had a subset of members already participating in an NTT task force. (It's worth noting that our chapter of AAUP is an advocacy chapter rather than a bargaining unit - for institutions with a bargaining unit that represents NTT faculty, there is a more straightforward path for demanding policy changes in this area.) The co-authors of this work initially met through the AAUP chapter, and soon after, co-authored an Op-Ed in the school newspaper outlining the issue [15] and (with the help of other AAUP members) launched a petition for equity in parental leave, workload relief, and contract extension policies.

It was through this process that we learned of the one school at Penn, SAS, with a more comprehensive policy. At that point, it was clear that there was a discrepancy not just in published policies but also in their implementation and adoption across different schools and departments, so we decided to approach the Office of the Vice Provost for Faculty directly. Discussions are ongoing between this office and our small team, and the Vice Provost and Deans of most of the schools.

Strategies for Success

In this section, we discuss concrete steps that individual faculty, groups of faculty, and universities can take to develop equitable caregiving policies that support faculty well-being and, ultimately, student success. Institutional policies on caregiving support need to be seen as foundational in ensuring that faculty can research, teach, and collaborate throughout their working lives. We close with a series of high-level findings about building and strengthening institutional support for caregiving policies:

- Institutions, especially in higher ed, tend towards inertia. With structural complexity and often limited resources, it can be difficult to advocate for change. This is especially true for working populations that are defined by impermanence, as can be the case for NTT faculty. Yet change can happen - generating meaningful change requires investing time in understanding the contemporary landscape and building alliances across campus.
- Education and training are essential, and some research has identified department chairs as the critical point of influence in addressing the disconnect between family-friendly policies and the existing climate and culture of the academy that discourages utilization of these policies [16].
- Agitating for institutional change starts with building deep knowledge of institutional policies and then using that knowledge to educate others, including those in positions of authority. We have learned that the level of institutional power and authority isn't necessarily correlated with up-to-date familiarity with institutional policies.
- Reach out to administrators (HR, faculty affairs) early to ensure a shared understanding of existing policies and to understand what's already being done in this area. It is unusual to bring an issue to an administrator for the first time - if the university already has an issue on its radar, you can present yourself as a collaborator rather than an agitator.
- Caregiving is an issue that cuts across all of an institution's workers. Universities that are already stratified in terms of job security and institutional privilege can end up reifying those stratifications through policies like those around parental leave. Identifying and working with allies is essential but often requires substantive work. We suggest looking for groups of people that either include or advocate for NTTs. This could include AAUP chapters and faculty senate, but also more adjacent groups, like the campus Women's Center, LGBT Center, chaplain, or child care center. Staff may have their own groups working in this area. Building allyship makes an issue harder to ignore.
- Be patient, but not too patient. During meetings with administrators, ask for timelines and follow-up meetings. Point to policies of peer institutions as benchmarks and emphasize issues of retention and hiring.

- When needed, get loud. Be willing to escalate approaches, from op-eds and petitions to rallies and protests.

Finally, we want to acknowledge that in this paper, we have focused on parental leave and workload relief policies, but it's important to note that many kinds of caregiving responsibilities require support from employers. Families can require many types of care, from school-age kids with chronic illnesses to aging parents or an injured spouse. Establishing fair, transparent, and consistent policies fosters a more inclusive and supportive academic environment, benefiting students, staff, faculty, and the university's reputation alike.

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