Rhode Island Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights
Issues Statement on the Contingent Faculty Role in
Higher Education in Rhode Island

July 1, 2021

The Rhode Island Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights offers this statement to highlight the need to ensure that contingent Higher Education faculty, including but not limited to adjunct professors, part-time lecturers, graduate teaching assistants, and laboratory assistants and technicians are afforded fuller inclusion in the life of the institutions they serve and receive compensation and professional status more commensurate with the important teaching and mentoring mission they serve. Their working conditions affect multiple protected groups. Repeated studies over many years have outlined numerous issues in the Higher Education Labor Model that negatively affect people of protected status across the nation.

1. Over 70% of College Faculty are Contingent Employees;¹ 70% of those are over 40 years old and more than half are female.² 63% are over 50 years old.³ Additionally, “Of the 10.4 percent of faculty positions held by underrepresented racial and ethnic groups in 2007, 7.6 percent are contingent positions—which means that 73 percent of underrepresented faculty hold positions that do not give them adequate wages or benefits, job security, or meaningful academic freedom.”⁴

2. Minority Students and First Generation College students are more likely than their majority peers to enroll in Remedial Courses.⁵ A majority of remedial and Introductory Course are taught

by Adjunct Faculty. It has been shown that these students are less likely to succeed in college if taught by Adjunct Faculty. The reason for this has less to do with teaching ability than it has with working conditions.

3. Working Conditions that negatively impact faculty also negatively impact their students. A 2018 American Federation of Teachers Report that documented the high number of Contingent Faculty receiving Public Assistance, foregoing medical care, not having access to training, office space, enough time to meet individually with students, security of future teaching assignments allowing students time to have faculty know them well enough to offer recommendations, academic guidance, etc., summarized it this way: “Contingent Faculty Working Conditions are Student Learning Conditions.” Especially affected are students with disabilities. Contingent faculty “may find meeting their needs for accommodation overwhelming or unachievable.” Adjunct Faculty with disabilities are “often fearful” of requesting accommodations for themselves.

The Rhode Island Advisory Committee recommends that the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights encourage Rhode Island state and local officials to consider ways in which the work life of its Contingent Higher Education Workforce can be improved since the effect on students, especially those in protected classes, is so direct. The Committee asks that Rhode Island State and local officials work to ensure access to the full life of the academy, pay commensurate with the responsibilities and create pathways to a more permanent employment; that educated and competent professionals deserve, for the benefit of the students they serve, the faculty, and the long-term stability of the institutions. As stated in The Atlantic: There is No Excuse for How Universities Treat Adjuncts.”

###


7 Ibid.


The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, established by the Civil Rights Act of 1957, is the only independent, bipartisan agency charged with advising the President and Congress on civil rights and reporting annually on federal civil rights enforcement. Our 51 state Advisory Committees offer a broad perspective on civil rights concerns at state and local levels. The Commission: in our 7th decade, a continuing legacy of influence in civil rights. Follow us on Twitter and Facebook. This statement is the work of the Rhode Island Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. The statement may rely on testimony, studies, and data generated from third parties. Advisory statements are reviewed by Commission staff only for legal sufficiency and procedural compliance with Commission policies. The views, findings, and recommendations expressed in this statement are those of a majority of the Rhode Island Advisory Committee, and do not necessarily represent the views of the Commission, nor do they represent the policies of the U.S. Government.