Nontenure-line educators

Understanding their importance and impact

This paper was published in June 2015. The ideas and recommendations within it are among dozens of suggestions that arose from the Stanford Engineering Future process. Share your thoughts with us at SoEFutureFeedback@stanford.edu.
The School of Engineering has many nontenure-line educators who are critical to the success of our undergraduate and graduate programs.

These educators include lecturers, senior lecturers, consulting professors (many of whom teach), professors (teaching), professors (research — many of whom teach) and professors of the practice. The roles played by these people vary widely. However, the importance and impact of their roles is often not well understood by tenure-track faculty and administration, and their contributions can be marginalized when important decisions are made about departments and the school.

A subset of the SoE’s lecturers, senior lecturers and consulting professors are extremely involved in the life of the school. For instance, they:

• Mentor a substantial number of students through career and life decisions.
• Write recommendations for scholarships, awards, and graduate school, PhD, postdoctoral and other university appointments
• Teach school-to-work skills.
• Leverage industry connections (internships, job placement, references).
• Support unique challenges of diversity students (e.g., minorities, women and athletes).
• Participate in PhD qualifying exams, oral exams and reading committees.
• Attract resources.

These important contributions often go unrecognized.
Full-time nontenure-line educators are a highly contributing group that is involved and responsive in students’ day-to-day lives and dedicated to the success of students’ short-term goals and long-term careers. In contrast, many people with part-time nontenure-line appointments have much less connection to their departments or SoE, such as a lecturer who teaches (perhaps even on a volunteer basis) one class during one quarter per year. Yet all nontenure-line educators play a critical role in generating novel courses and standing in when tenure-track faculty go on sabbatical or have to limit their teaching because of administrative responsibilities.

We have an undeniable need for both full- and part-time nontenure-line educators. The enormous popularity of engineering majors, along with the desire for personalized, hands-on education, has increased our need for a large and excellent population of teachers in SoE. The research and administrative responsibilities of tenure-line faculty members are often such that departments find it impossible to teach all their core classes using tenure-line faculty members. Just as important, many of our nontenure-line educators are among the highest-rated teachers in SoE, and they provide unique perspectives for students in need of advising and mentoring.

A challenge facing SoE is that the large population of nontenure-line educators is not uniformly well managed in terms of evaluation, promotion and engagement. The number of lecturers, senior lecturers and consulting professors has grown organically but awkwardly as departments have struggled to provide students with excellent teaching while dealing with limited resources for educational activities. Currently, teaching loads for tenure-line faculty members and level of involvement of nontenure-line educators vary widely in SoE. In addition, some nontenure-line educators aspire to become professors (teaching) and professors of the practice, but they receive little guidance for how to make this a career path.
Define the roles of nontenure-line educators.

A committee on nontenured academic positions, led by the senior associate dean for faculty affairs, recently convened to define the roles of nontenure-line educators. A key challenge for this committee is the variety of roles and appointments held by the school’s 450-plus nontenure-line educators. Some are full-time employees, some part-time employees and others volunteers.

The committee will recommend a new set of titles and definitions for nontenure-line educators that will do much to eliminate confusion about the nature of each type of appointment, responsibilities and opportunities for growth.
Create an environment of respect and engagement for nontenure-line educators.

Change school administrative policies, practices and culture to more fully embrace nontenure-line educators as a fourth pillar of the school (faculty, staff, students and educators).

Career growth of nontenure-line educators, particularly full-time employees, should be a significant concern of department chairs and the dean. The current process created to define the roles of nontenure-line educators should include recommendations and financial support for professional development activities for each type of appointment.

SoE should create mechanisms to recognize and reward nontenure-line educators who are making a significant impact on teaching and learning. The rewards should be highly visible and bring to light teaching and other activities that are sometimes unknown within their own departments.

It is essential that full-time, highly contributing nontenure-line educators have job security — without this we will not be able to recruit, retain or develop the careers of this group. SoE should consider a new funding model for nontenure-line educators in which teachers essential to the function of the school are immune to changes in departmental operating budgets. Multiyear appointments for qualified nontenure-line educators would provide increased job security and promote loyalty in a competitive job market.

Departments should more clearly define how they engage nontenure-line faculty. While some departments and organizations (most notably Computer Science and the d.school) have excellent structures for engagement of nontenure-line educators, this is not uniform throughout SoE. We recommend that the level of engagement match the individual's level of contribution to our programs.

• Engagement may include participation in faculty meetings, decision-making about undergraduate and graduate program requirements or hiring new nontenure-line educators.
• Engagement can be as simple as communication. At both the department and SoE levels, nontenure-line educators often fail to hear about developments critical to their roles because they are not included on the right email list. SoE should maintain a schoolwide email list of teaching staff and make sure they receive important announcements and opportunities.
• Engagement is a two-way street. Nontenure-line educators can be a great source of information for SoE in terms of improving the educational environment, resources and the quality of our programs. We need to create mechanisms for nontenure-line educators to give feedback at both the department and SoE levels.
Create a strong community of teachers.

SoE nontenure-line educators lack a schoolwide community to help them exchange ideas about teaching and learning, facilitate cross-departmental collaboration and learn about opportunities. In addition, nontenure-line educators typically interact regularly with only a small subset of SoE tenure-line faculty members, which limits their potential for growth and service to the school.

**The school should set up a formal community** of nontenure-line educators with leadership in place to help implement all recommendations. It should also create a fund for community events and stipends for professional development of nontenure-line educators.

**Teachers who contribute** above a level to be decided should be assigned mentors (more senior nontenure-line educators or tenure-line faculty members) to provide guidance and support.

**SoE should facilitate cross-departmental communication** among nontenure-line educators, to support and organize networking events, and to generate mechanisms that allow nontenure-line educators and tenure-line faculty to interact across the school.

**Nontenure-line educators could mentor** junior tenure-track faculty on teaching and learning. We should extend such models and/or create a new form of teaching community across the school.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Hire more top-quality, high-contributing educators who do not do research.

SoE and departments could conduct highly competitive searches to recruit outstanding nontenure-line educators who historically might have gone to schools without research programs. Active searches would ensure that we do not default to nontenure-line educators already living in the area, and would increase respect for nontenure-line career paths. Moreover, more educators in SoE would alleviate pressures on tenure-line faculty that result from quickly changing enrollments, especially in departments with heavy teaching loads and significant laboratory requirements.¹

Additional recommendations:

• We recommend a short, iterative process to address the issues and most effectively implement the recommendations offered in this whitepaper.

• There is a significant need for additional resources for teaching and learning in general, including classrooms appropriate for active and hands-on learning, more support for maker spaces and centralized support for engineering student groups to pursue their projects. These are relevant to all faculty and staff who teach.

• SoE also could benefit from closer attention to the treatment and development of research staff members (e.g., consulting professors who lead research programs rather than teach). They often fall through the cracks in the same manner as nontenure-line educators.

¹A barrier to this recommendation is the perception that Stanford students (or their families) might expect students to be taught by tenure-line faculty members. Would we want to risk advertising our reliance on nontenure-line educators? Numerous discussions throughout the strategic planning process led us to the conclusion that when nontenure-line educators are excellent and properly engaged, there is no disappointment (and in most cases, no awareness) on the part of students when a course is taught by a nontenure-line educator instead of a tenure-line faculty member.