

AFT Michigan Stance on Contingent Faculty and Unemployment Insurance Eligibility

1. We believe that contingent faculty--college and university teachers who are not on the tenure track, have little job security, and are variously called adjuncts, part-time faculty, lecturers, and other titles--have earned the right to access unemployment benefits when they are laid off.
2. Michigan's unemployment insurance system is confusing in many ways, particularly involving education employees; however, the facts, the law, and morality all argue that contingent faculty should generally be considered eligible for unemployment during semesters (including spring and summer) when the institution is operating, they are available to work, but are not employed.
3. Almost by definition, contingent faculty do not have guaranteed employment for future semesters. Unless collective bargaining has significantly increased their job security, contingent faculty are generally employed for only a single semester at a time. Even in situations where certain instructors "usually" teach the same courses year after year, there is no assurance that things will not change completely the next term based on any number of factors.
4. Colleges and universities have shifted the majority of instructional work to contingent faculty not only because they are paid significantly less than full-time tenure-track faculty, but even more so because of administrators' desire for flexibility to increase or decrease faculty levels term by term. Many institutions in Michigan fluctuate by hundreds of instructors between semesters.
5. This type of uncertain employment situation is exactly what unemployment insurance systems were set up to address. The basic idea is that taxes are paid into the system during periods in which a person is working and benefits are withdrawn when there is no work available.
6. When considering whether contingent faculty have a "reasonable assurance" of continued employment, the most relevant comparison group is full-time tenure-track faculty at the institution. If they have significantly less job security than their tenure-track colleagues for future semesters, then institutions should not argue for their exclusion from unemployment benefits based on vague factors like listing the person's name on the course catalog.
7. The moral course for institutions of higher education is to choose one of two options. Either provide real job security to all faculty members, or accept that part of the cost of relying on a largely contingent workforce is acknowledging their right to access unemployment benefits during semesters in which there is no work available for them. If the institution wishes to maintain this level of workforce flexibility, they should be willing to pay their fair share to support our social safety net rather than asking individual faculty members to take on all the risk themselves.