



# Improving Working Conditions for Contract Academic Staff Recommendations for Departmental Chairs

*Prepared by the MRFA Advocacy and Communications Committee: Nov. 22, 2023*

## Introduction

Over the 2023 Winter term contract faculty members and department chairs were asked about various practices within their academic units with the aim to glean from current practices a set of best practices which could be used to make improvements in the day to day working conditions of contract faculty. There were 121 survey respondents. The survey contained ten questions for departmental chairs and 22 questions for contract faculty. The questions for contract faculty explored procedures around hiring and scheduling, office space, department meetings, and teaching multi-section courses. Chairs were asked about scheduling, FDC funding, service opportunities, communication practices, inviting contract faculty to meetings and their level of participation. Our review of the survey results suggest several practices that were appreciated by contract faculty. We share those best practices below with the hope that they will be considered for implementation as appropriate. Other suggestions represent a wish list of contract faculty that may or may not be workable given certain constraints around hiring or scheduling, but we include them here in case there may be opportunities to make them work.

### Invite Contract Faculty to Academic Unit Meetings

While 90% of chairs report inviting contract faculty to academic unit meetings, 23.6% of contract faculty report not being invited. 84% say they would attend meetings if invited.

### Ensure Contract Faculty Have Office Space

In addition to office space, having access to printing and copying was noted by many as a positive feature of employment. Nonetheless, 14% reported not having any office space. 45% report sharing office space with 1-3 others. 95% report having a key to their office space. Of particular concern are contract faculty without the ability to secure personal or professional belongings in an office while they are teaching. Chairs should work to remedy this situation.

### Invite Scheduling Input

Several contract faculty appreciate the additional security afforded by yearlong scheduling. Advance notice for what courses they will be teaching is important for them to properly prepare. Many contract members expressed their appreciation for having

the ability to provide input into course scheduling. But different practices exist in different academic units. 4 chairs, 36% report not allowing contract faculty opportunity to provide input for scheduling. Chair and coordinators could improve working conditions by seeking information on contract faculty availability (days and times) which may assist in planning program planning and delivery.

## **Communication**

Good, collegial, informative communication with coordinators or chairs was the most commonly cited example of a good working condition.

### **Hold regular (online) meetings with all contract faculty**

A specific form of helpful communication that emerged from the survey in addition to open accessible communication was having online meetings of all contract faculty at the start of the semester to check-in and end of the semester to debrief. Having such opportunities enables more community building.

It was found that communication around contract **rights and benefits**, however, was not forthcoming from most chairs. Chairs indicated that contract members, like all faculty, should familiarize themselves with the collective agreement to learn about the contract service honorarium, health benefits, tuition refunds, and more. While this information is being provided to contract faculty during orientation, it would be helpful to send out information as relevant around FDC opportunities, service honoraria, tuition refunds, and more.

## **Cultivate Collegial Relationships**

Related to communication is the cultivation of good relationships with full time faculty, being respected, and made to feel part of the team. This was identified as another important factor in a healthy working environment. Chairs and coordinators should consider ways to recognize the contributions and accomplishments of contract faculty more regularly. This might include announcements at meetings or emails for their accomplishments in research and teaching. This could also include ways of recognizing their expertise and teaching experience, including their innovations.