Issues and Challenges of Non-Tenure-Track Research Faculty: The UC Davis School of Medicine Experience

Lydia Pleotis Howell, MD, Chao-Yin Chen, PhD, Jesse P. Joad, MD, Ralph Green, MD, PhD, Edward J. Callahan, PhD, and Ann C. Bonham, PhD

Abstract

Nationally, medical schools are appointing growing numbers of research faculty into non-tenure-track positions, paralleling a similar trend in universities. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) issued a statement expressing concern that the marked growth in non-tenure-track faculty can undermine educational quality, academic freedom, and collegiality. Like other medical schools, the UC Davis School of Medicine has had a rise in non-tenure-track faculty in order to enhance its research mission, in particular in the Salared Adjunct faculty track (SalAdj). SalAdj faculty have more difficulty in achieving promotion, report inequitable treatment and less quality of life, have less opportunity to participate in governance, and feel second-class and insecure. These issues reflect those described by the AAUP. The authors describe the efforts at UC Davis to investigate and address these issues, implementation of a plan for improvement based on task force recommendations, and the lessons learned. Supporting transfer to faculty tracks in the academic senate, enhancing financial support, ensuring eligibility for internal grants, and equitable space assignments have contributed to an improved career path and more satisfaction among SalAdj faculty.

Challenges in addressing these issues include limited availability of tenure-track positions, financial resources, adequate communication regarding change, and compliance with existing faculty search policies.

greater administrative flexibility and better opportunity to fulfill their missions, because junior faculty are typically hired on 100% research funding, and switching to the tenure track is generally not considered until the faculty member has "proven" himself or herself.4-5 Juliano and Oxford6 have also noted the rise in appointments of non-tenure-track research faculty in medical schools, particularly within the context of the national trend to appoint PhD faculty into clinical departments as the functional bridge between biomedical research and medical practice in order to foster translational research.7 Noting the disadvantages associated with these appointments, they have advocated for the creation of alternative career tracks that provide "financial compensation, professional status, and employment stability" to enhance the quality of life and satisfaction of these scientists.6

Our school, the UC Davis School of Medicine (hereafter, "UC Davis"), has followed the national trend and has increased the number of its research faculty beyond the limits of its tenure-track positions through appointments in non-tenure-track series over many years. In an effort to illuminate the issues and challenges of non-tenure-track faculty nationwide, we wrote this article to share our school's experience with these issues and challenges and to describe schoolwide solutions, how these were implemented, and the changes that resulted, because we believe that other schools could benefit from that experience. Regarding the school's implementation of solutions, we focus on a single department, the Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine (DoPLM), to illustrate the changes that took place on the department level. This department had, and still has, one of the largest numbers of non-tenure-track faculty members. We present these findings within the context of the AAUP's statement on non-tenure-track faculty and their suggestions for improvement.3

Previous published reports on nontenured faculty tracks have chiefly addressed issues with the nontenured clinical faculty tracks4-16; there have been few publications on faculty issues associated with nontenured research tracks in schools of medicine. We believe that our experiences provide important "lessons learned," because other schools of medicine are wrestling with similar issues that affect their academic environments and that influence not only the present welfare of their research faculty and research missions but the future as well.

Issues at UC Davis

Like many public schools of medicine nationwide, UC Davis receives a fixed number of state-funded, tenure-track positions for instruction and research. These are generally indexed to the number of students. Expansion of the research mission has therefore required addition of faculty into nontenure tracks. As a result, by June 2005, 142 (41%) of the 351 research-intensive faculty in our school were in nontenure tracks. More than half of these non-tenure-track, research-intensive faculty were in the Salaried Adjunct (SalAdj) series, which is also the only research-intensive series that is not in the academic senate. Unlike the adjunct title at other schools of medicine or in the other schools and colleges on our main campus, almost all faculty members in the SalAdj series at UC Davis are salaried full-time and do not have any other employment. Because SalAdj faculty are not members of the academic senate, they have limited voting privileges and limited participation in university governance and major committees, and only minimal notification is required to lower salary or terminate if grant funding is lost and bridge funds aren't available.17 SalAdj has therefore been the favored series for non-tenure-track research faculty appointments in recent years. The In Residence (IR) series is another research-intensive series and includes membership in the academic senate, but it is not used as frequently for adding non-tenure-track faculty, because a longer notification period is required to lower salary or not reappoint a faculty member when grant support is lost.17 Key differences in these two nontenure, research-intensive faculty tracks are listed in Table 1. All of the academic series in the University of California system have been more fully described in a previous publication.18

Our non-tenure-track faculty make major contributions to our school's research and teaching missions, and many have responsibilities and accomplishments typically associated with tenure-track faculty members. In 2005, when we first began to explore the issues of non-tenure-track research faculty, SalAdj faculty held 30% of all the grant funds among UC Davis faculty. A total of 35 (50%) served in important roles as instructors of record of courses, and the average time spent in teaching was 9%, almost double the minimum required by our school for this track (5%). But in career planning sessions and other informal conversations, our department chairs and deans became increasingly aware that SalAdj faculty voiced more dissatisfaction than did their IR colleagues or faculty in the other academic tracks. Issues raised by SalAdj as sources of dissatisfaction included

- the perception that they are seen as "second class" by faculty in other series;
- misrepresentation as "volunteers" due to different use of this title by other schools and colleges on the University of California, Davis (UCD) campus, and at other universities;
- ineligibility or disadvantage in applying for grant funds based on the SalAdj title, perceived as an impermanent appointment;
- inability to participate fully in UCD governance and department voting, because they are not members of the academic senate, in contrast to the IR faculty, who are;
- ineligibility for equity reviews and formal academic appraisals for future promotion by the vice provost and committee for academic personnel;
- inequities in space assignment by departments; and
- the perception that SalAdj faculty members are more expendable because they are more easily terminated or not reappointed, in contrast to faculty members in other tracks.

A task force was appointed in 2005 to examine the above issues and identify solutions. The task force was composed of faculty in several different academic tracks, including SalAdj faculty members and those formerly in that series, the associate dean for research, and others. Department chairs from four representative basic science and clinical departments with the largest number of SalAdj faculty were also part of the task force and included the chair of DoPLM. The task force created a confidential
Table 1
Policies Governing Appointments in the Two Non-Tenure-Track Research-Intensive Series at the University of California, Davis, 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy</th>
<th>Adjunct series (includes salaried adjunct series)</th>
<th>In residence series</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Funding for salary</td>
<td>≥50% of base must be from a source other than state funds.</td>
<td>≥50% of base must be from a source other than state funds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic review procedure</td>
<td>Same as Ladder Rank. <strong>Exception</strong>: Formal appraisal is not required at year 4 of assistant professorship to assess outlook for promotion.</td>
<td>Same as Ladder Rank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eight-year rule (“up or out”) for assistant professors</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criteria for appointment and advancement</td>
<td>Regular and meaningful contribution to teaching through participation in formal courses and/or formal guidance of graduate students. Flexibility is expected in judging character of research and creative work.</td>
<td>Must be academically qualified for appointment in tenure-track series, using the same criteria and standards of performance as specified for tenure-track faculty in teaching, research/creative work, professional competence, and university/public service.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximum appointment periods (end dates)</td>
<td>Assistant professors = 2 years</td>
<td>Assistant professors = 2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Associate professors = 2 years</td>
<td>Associate professors = 2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professors = 3 years</td>
<td>Professors = 3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedures for nonreappointment or reduction in salary</td>
<td>Written notice if ≥50% appt. If &lt;8 years of service, automatic termination on end date unless notice of reappointment. If 8+ years of service, 60 days’ written notice of intent with basis for nonreappointment and right to respond within 14 calendar days, followed by notice of action with opportunity to grieve.</td>
<td>Initial appointment expires on end date; no additional notice is required.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early termination</td>
<td>Only for good cause</td>
<td>Only for good cause</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representation in university governance</td>
<td>Academic federation</td>
<td>Academic senate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Funding for salary obtained extramural grants. Forty-eight (48%) of SalAdj faculty did not get individual space after academic series, and 50 (72%) said that resources and space were allocated fairly with concerns voiced in the AAUP’s statement. A total of 31 (44%) reported inequities related to resources, consistent with concerns voiced in the AAUP’s statement. A total of 31 (44%) reported in the survey that they did not feel that resources and space were allocated fairly or readily as compared with other academic series, and 50 (72%) said that they did not get individual space after obtaining extramural grants. Forty-eight (68%) said they received little, if any, start-up funds, and 27 (39%) reported having received statements of concern from grant reviewers regarding commitment from the school for facilities and resources. The SalAdj faculty therefore felt disadvantaged and misrepresented in the competitive grant process. Feeling disadvantaged seems to add to SalAdj faculty members’ insecurity, because their positions and salaries are almost entirely dependent on obtaining grant funding. Similar findings have recently been reported in a survey of adjunct faculty published in June 2009 in The Chronicle of Higher Education.19

Respect and quality of life
The responding SalAdj faculty also reported significant issues related to their quality of life. Thirty-eight (54%) reported that they are not treated equally or viewed positively by different groups both within and outside of UC. Davis. The inequality of treatment was felt to be more frequent at the higher administrative levels, including the dean’s office, campus administration, and campus promotion committee, than on the department or division level. A total of 43 (62%) of SalAdj faculty felt that they have an insufficient voice in their department or the school, largely due to their lack of membership in the academic senate. Unlike the IR faculty, who are also research-intensive and nontenure track but who belong to the academic senate, SalAdj faculty are ineligible to vote on appointment and promotion actions of their faculty colleagues in most other academic tracks, and they are ineligible to fully participate in many committees. As a result, many SalAdj faculty commented in the survey that their series is not perceived by their departments as a true career track, though they (the SalAdj faculty) would...
have preferred a career track. They stated that they feel that departments do not have a long-term view of their positions, and that a good mechanism or plan does not exist for SalAdj faculty to move into tenured or nontenured academic senate positions. These issues, and the implication that they are expendable and easily terminated, add to feelings of stress and insecurity in SalAdj faculty. Sixty-two (89%) of SalAdj faculty reported in the survey that they do not believe they have sufficient security and career stability, with consequent negative effects on their private lives.

Promotion
The survey findings revealed that SalAdj faculty are experiencing greater difficulty in achieving promotion than are faculty in other research-intensive series in our school. The majority of SalAdj survey respondents felt that they had to exert more effort to be successful than did tenure-track faculty. Almost half of the 70 SalAdj faculty survey respondents said that they did not feel that they were treated fairly in the merit and promotion process. This perception was due in part to the fact that they were ineligible for midcareer appraisals or equity reviews by the higher levels of administration, despite being held to the same academic standards as tenure-track and IR faculty.

Gender distribution
SalAdj faculty are disproportionately female. At the time of the survey in 2005, 41% of SalAdj faculty were women compared with 21% of IR faculty and 31% of the faculty as a whole, and there has been little change in more recent years. This disparity may reflect the limited number of women in the academic pipeline over the many years in which faculty have been appointed, particularly because the majority of the tenure-track faculty are senior and joined the faculty more than 15 years ago when there were fewer women candidates, in contrast to the growing pool of women pursuing academic careers now. However, many in our school are concerned about possible unconscious bias leading to hiring women into series such as SalAdj, which are perceived as less prestigious because of the lack of tenure opportunity and lack of academic senate membership.

Institutional vulnerabilities
The relatively minimal institutional commitment to SalAdj faculty and their lack of participation in the academic senate means that fewer of those faculty are able to participate in long-term institutional planning, mentoring, and peer review for reappointment and tenure that the AAUP points out are important to fostering the collegial environment of academia. As the AAUP also emphasizes, these inequities among academic colleagues regularly remind SalAdj faculty of their lack of status in the academic community. As non-tenure-track faculty have risen in numbers, our school and others like it have become vulnerable to these negative effects, which also undermine the institution’s ability to fully serve the public good in research, education, and public service. Reflecting this situation, our school often has difficulty finding sufficient and appropriate faculty leadership to participate and even chair important standing committees, including those related to curriculum, student progress, and faculty academic reviews, because so many faculty are in a nonacademic senate series and therefore ineligible.

Plan for Improvement
UC Davis recognizes the major contributions that our SalAdj faculty make to our teaching and research missions, which included over $24 million in active grants and contracts at the time of the survey. The leadership of UC Davis therefore seeks to improve SalAdj faculty members’ career satisfaction, quality of life, and stability/security. In particular, the leadership wishes to provide them better opportunities to join the tenure track. The AAUP statement on non-tenure-track faculty notes that transitioning to less reliance on non-tenure-track faculty should include an assessment of the current situation, which the task force accomplished. In addition, we at UC Davis have realized that each department needs to consider how to best distribute their faculty within the different academic tracks in order to optimally meet the department’s long-term goals. Constraints also need to be identified, because these can prevent immediate realization of these goals and prevent distribution of faculty within the desired series. Such constraints may include budget issues or perceptions regarding “prestige” of the different academic series. On the basis of the recommendations of our task force and the input from our school’s council of department chairs, the UC Davis leadership announced a plan for change in February 2007. These recommendations are as consistent as possible with the AAUP’s recommendations on transition to best practices. They also reflect many of the solutions recently proposed in a commentary in Academic Medicine.

• Recruitment: UC Davis does not have the ability to create new tenure-track faculty positions, so currently it is not possible to completely avoid appointment in a non-tenure-track series, as the AAUP would prefer. However, UC Davis has committed to critically evaluate proposed recruitments in the SalAdj series and to consider whether recruitment into other academic tracks would be more appropriate. Any new recruitment in the SalAdj series is carefully reviewed for approval by the associate dean of academic personnel. In addition, the chair or his or her designee is advised to disclose to a candidate whether the department does not anticipate that this position will ever evolve into a senate position at the time of appointment or during subsequent career planning sessions.

• Changing academic series for current SalAdj faculty: Current SalAdj faculty should be offered the opportunity to apply for an appointment in an academic senate, research-intensive series, and they should be favorably considered if they demonstrate independent extramural long-term funding and a research program or educational role deemed critical for links to other programs within the school. This would serve to motivate SalAdj faculty to aspire to excellence. Academic senate membership will thus provide these faculty members a more equitable voice in governance and full participation in faculty privileges. The department chair and faculty member should negotiate appropriate start-up funds to support the change. The dean’s office promised to consider partial matching support funds on a case-by-case basis, because such a change may be an unplanned and unbudgeted expense to the department, and not all departments have reserves and resources to easily accommodate.
Monitoring of resources:
Quality of life issues:
Ongoing support for non-tenure-track faculty: Indirect cost allocations should be returned to all non-tenure-track research faculty members unless the department provides the faculty member with more than the minimum 5% support required for his or her teaching contributions. SalAdj faculty who do not change series will have the same access to internal funding mechanisms as do those faculty in the academic senate.

Quality of life issues: Departments are strongly encouraged to extend department voting privileges to SalAdj faculty to the extent allowed by University of California policy.

Monitoring of resources: Departments will be monitored through the budget process to ensure that the adjunct faculty who do not switch to another series are paid for their teaching contributions from sources other than their grant support.

Implementation: One Department’s Experience

The DoPLM has been one of the first departments to implement the majority of the recommendations for existing SalAdj faculty. Seven of 30 faculty in DoPLM were in the SalAdj series at the time of the survey. Six months after the announcement of the changes described above, three SalAdj faculty members successfully moved to other academic series, and they continue to report greater career satisfaction in their new series. Two of these faculty transferred to the IR track and are currently applying for an open tenure-track position. Three additional individuals left the faculty because of retirement or to pursue other opportunities, which for one included a move to an administrative position.

Other departments are interested in transferring SalAdj faculty to an academic senate series but have not yet done so, chiefly because of concerns about the financial implications, particularly regarding expectations for salary support. As described earlier, the differences in notification periods between our two non-tenure-track, research-intensive faculty tracks can create significant and previously unbudgeted financial obligations that could be a hardship to a department, especially for one with minimal reserves. The leadership of our school recognizes this potential hardship, particularly in the current challenging budgetary environment. In addition, the SalAdj series is believed to be most appropriate to teaching programs in some departments. UC Davis is therefore not mandating departments to change all eligible adjunct faculty to an academic senate series.

New SalAdj faculty have been added in the DoPLM and represent individuals at affiliated institutions or in other campus units who need an academic home in the school of medicine in order to enhance collaborative research activities with our faculty members. This practice is similar to that used for most other new adjunct appointments in our school and is more consistent with the model on our general campus. These new SalAdj faculty recruitment meetings have been reviewed and approved by the associate dean for academic personnel within the context of the survey findings, as the task force recommended. New IR faculty have also been added to our department and most likely would have been appointed in the SalAdj series prior to the task force recommendations. As included in the task force recommendations, the DoPLM has long supported its non-tenure-track faculty, including SalAdj, by providing departmental “bridge” funds, and this support continues to be available. These funds are derived from excess clinical income and from indirect costs returned to the department from grants. The DoPLM also continues its long-standing practice of allowing SalAdj faculty to have the maximum voting privileges allowed by university policy, and funds the teaching effort for these faculty, also consistent with the task force’s recommendations.

Lessons Learned

There are many challenges to full, schoolwide implementation changes such as those recommended by our task force recommendations. In addition to financial challenges, communication regarding change is another challenge. A few department chairs incorrectly oversimplified the recommendation that the SalAdj series was to be used less frequently by our school for full-time salaried research faculty members. Therefore, they told their faculty that the SalAdj series “was going away.” This created anxiety among some SalAdj faculty that they would be laid off. Close attention to accurate communication is therefore an important consideration when announcing changes such as those outlined above.

Another implementation challenge involves the process required for a SalAdj faculty member to change to an academic senate series, including both tenure track and IR. The SalAdj faculty members in DoPLM who changed to an academic senate track had to formally apply through an open and competitive search, as is required by University of California system-wide policy, and this can be perceived as an annoying administrative obstacle. This open search requirement may not be just a local requirement unique to the University of California; it is likely to be an issue at other schools as well, because this process promotes diversity and fairness. The AAUP statement also recognizes that the practice of appointing non-tenure-track faculty without an open search can be a disadvantage to the academy of scholars, and the statement advocates open searches.3 We do not see the open search requirement as an obstacle or disadvantage to those seeking to change series. As we observed in the DoPLM, SalAdj faculty members who successfully changed to the IR series via a search were at a competitive advantage because those faculty members’ prior participation in the research program of the department, center, or institute made them familiar with the research program and the acquisition of unique and necessary skills and experience.

Bridge funding and salary support for SalAdj and other non-tenure-track research faculty members to enhance their sense of security is another challenge, and the UC Davis leadership did not choose to implement the task force recommendation to establish designated funds for these purposes. The task force had recommended creating a pool through financial contributions by departments for teaching or service provided by nondepartmental faculty members. Implementing this recommendation
was seen as a significant challenge because the scope extends beyond the boundaries of our school. An adjunct faculty member’s teaching and service contributions often take place in interdisciplinary centers, institutes, or graduate groups that span campus units. As an example, SalAdj faculty members in the DoPPLM teach in several graduate groups such as Nutritional Biology, which includes faculty from the School of Medicine, School of Veterinary Medicine, College of Agriculture, and College of Biologic Sciences. Financial contributions to a salary pool would thus need to span campus schools and colleges in addition to spanning UC Davis departments. Although interdisciplinary teaching and research has been strongly encouraged in recent years, the corollary of interdisciplinary financing for faculty support is yet to be easily realized. This is particularly true for teaching, which is nationally recognized to be an underfunded and undervalued activity. Interdisciplinary financing is a larger, campus- or system-based issue that our school may pursue in the future.

An interesting and unanticipated parallel issue that came to light following announcement of the task force recommendations involved efforts by some departments to move SalAdj faculty members to other nonacademic senate series that did not have professorial titles, such as the project scientist series and the professional researcher series. Although there was concern that this represented a misguided response to the task force recommendations, it was actually a reaction to the university’s heightened attention to compliance with effort reporting on federal grants. The university requires that all faculty in professorial titles, including SalAdj faculty, teach in formal courses and that this effort be supported by a fund source other than research grants. Unlike the DoPPLM, some departments do not have sufficient funds to support these teaching efforts and have found it necessary to move individuals from the SalAdj series to nonprofessorial, nonacademic senate series because these do not require teaching. We have observed that many SalAdj faculty members have been opposed to making this change because it aggravates their feelings of second-class citizenship and dissatisfaction with their university careers. They also believe that these nonprofessorial titles make them even less competitive for grant funding. As a result, the provost’s office is reexamining the effort-reporting requirements and the types of teaching that can or cannot be supported through research grants, so that such changes will not be necessary.

Faculty satisfaction remains a difficult and elusive challenge. It may well be that faculty may never be fully satisfied, because a career in academic medicine is a difficult path, particularly given the many changes that continue to arise related to health care economics and that ultimately have effects on the amount of time and resources available for research and teaching. Four years after our task force first met to address the issues of the SalAdj faculty, UC Davis participated in the AAMC’s 2009 Faculty Forward survey to learn more about faculty satisfaction and where efforts should be focused for improvement. The mean responses for all UC Davis faculty were positive regarding satisfaction with their department and school (3.74 and 3.51, respectively, on a five-point Likert scale), but interestingly, SalAdj faculty respondents rated their satisfaction with their department and the school as even higher (4.08 and 3.78, respectively). This may indicate that our school’s efforts to address SalAdj careers are acknowledged and appreciated. It may also reflect that the caliber and commitment of SalAdj faculty in terms of dedication to the mission of the school are at least as good as those of faculty in other tracks.

Summing Up

We found that UC Davis’ efforts to enhance its research mission through non-tenure-track appointments in the SalAdj faculty series has rendered the school vulnerable to the disadvantages of increasing non-tenure-track appointments seen in universities and colleges nationwide. Our plan to transition to a healthier model of faculty appointments that is more consistent with the AAUP statement on nontenure faculty members has led to improvements, as the example of the DoPPLM illustrates. A role for non-tenure-track appointments will inevitably continue to exist in order to achieve growth and expansion of the research mission, but we anticipate that the eventual distribution of faculty within the UC research-intensive series may be different from the current configuration in our school. As Academic Medicine editor Steven Kanter pointed out in a recent editorial, it is important to engage in meaningful and focused thinking about the forces driving change in order to develop satisfying, high-quality faculty careers that enhance the academic missions of schools of medicine. We therefore encourage other schools of medicine to learn from our experiences and to similarly focus thinking and evaluation on their non-tenure-track research faculty in order to optimize talent and satisfaction and to ensure that schools are well positioned for the future.

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