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# What Teaching Looks Like

Higher Education through Photographs

*Cassandra Volpe Horii and Martin Springborg*



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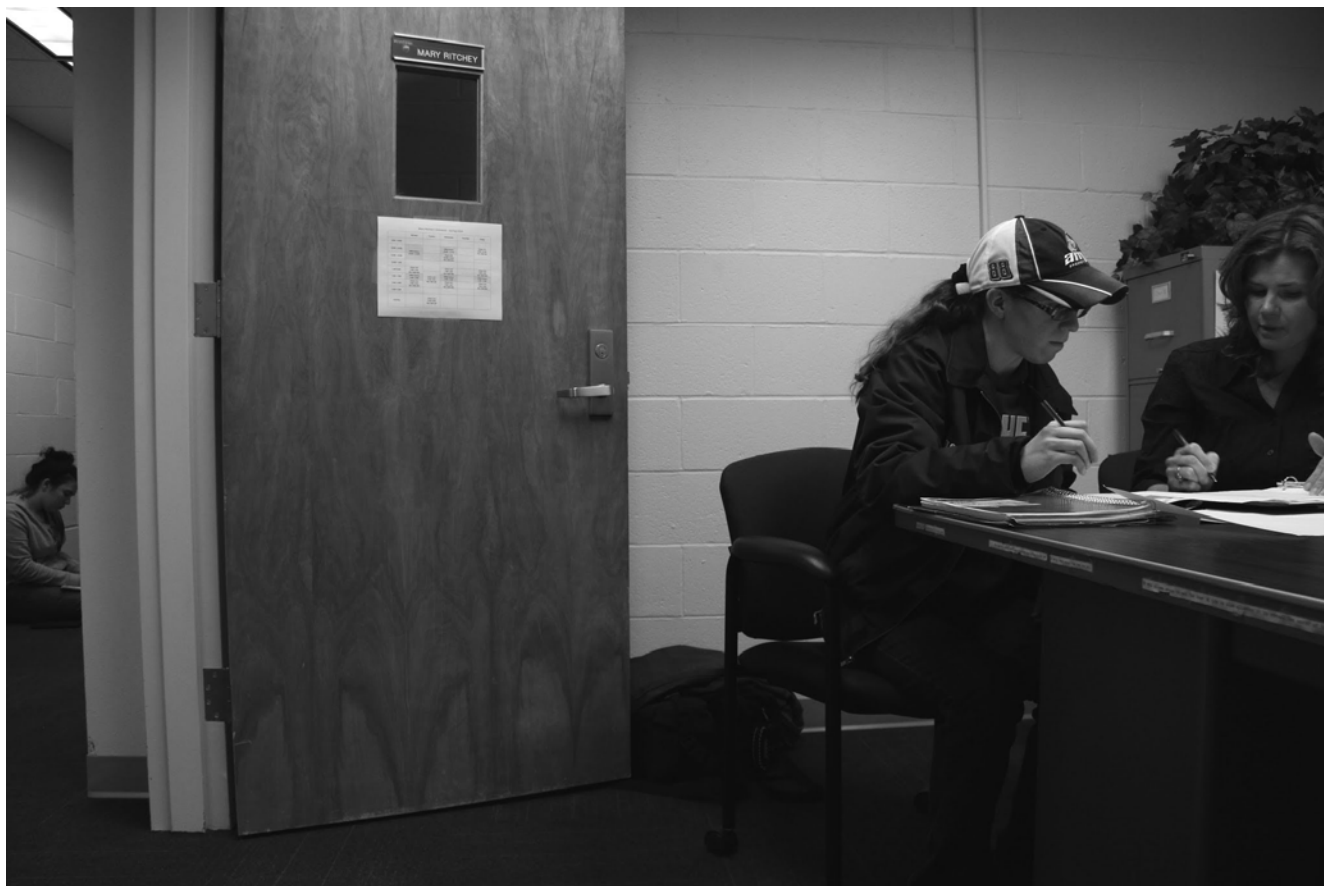
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**6.01**

*A faculty member in chemistry at a baccalaureate institution assists students during office hours.*

## CHAPTER 6

# Hidden Work

## *Educational Labor Revealed*

My job can go from one end of the spectrum to the other, from crisis to amazing. Some days it's very very serious and others it's jumping for joy. [The photographs] captured both ends of the spectrum in one day—some photos where we're doing serious paperwork, others where we're happy and celebrating. I like seeing that range.

*—participant in The Teaching and Learning Project, baccalaureate institution, field not specified*

All faculty members must be properly supported financially, with appropriate job stability and support. They also should be affectively supported.

*—former dean, public university*

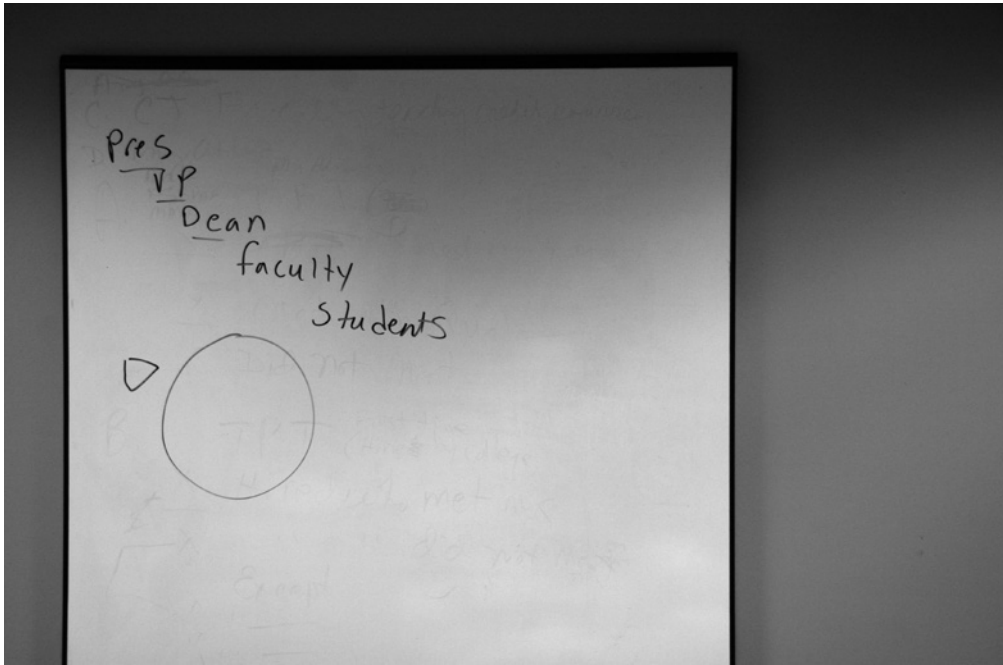


## Sectors and Status

One of my earliest insights from the beginnings of *The Teaching and Learning Project* was the revelation of the many kinds of normally invisible work taking place on college and university campuses (first-person statements in this chapter are in reference to Martin Springborg). By photographing faculty, staff, and administrators in their offices, in centers for teaching and learning, in conference rooms, libraries, and casual campus spaces, the project began not only to burst typical university silos, but to cultivate empathy for and understanding of the educational labor undertaken by those filling the many different roles in postsecondary institutions today. The photographs also soon began to confront larger issues with contingent labor in higher education, such as the increasing numbers of adjunct faculty, with new immediacy.

When I first started formally making photographs for *The Teaching and Learning Project*—declaring it a project, describing it as such when asking people if they'd like to participate, and making sure participants gave informed consent for their inclusion in it—I was surprised at the number of “yes” responses I received; I had anticipated far more rejection. As much as I was an insider to various academic sectors, I perceived the walls of privacy to be high around my colleagues' work; it turned out that no one had ever asked.

I started by photographing my closest faculty colleagues, which led to conversations with and photographs of their deans, which led to conversations with and photographs of college provosts and presidents—all connected in some way to making sure teaching and learning could happen, and could continue to happen term after term, year after year. Not long after starting this project documenting postsecondary teaching and learning, I found I was dedicating just as much effort to documenting the hidden work of teaching, including the work of instructors beyond the classroom, and the work of administrators and aca-



## 6.02

*An outline of an organizational chart at an associate's institution.*

demic staff. This unexpected development showed the connectedness of major campus sectors to each other and to student success. We introduced you to some of these behind-the-scenes views as early as the introduction, and you may wish to go back to images 0.08 – 0.13 again, now observing with curiosity how these normally obscured views surface other dimensions of teaching that may be important. Likewise as you view the photographs in the next section, images 6.03 – 6.07, consider whether you have seen photographs documenting aspects of administrative and staff work that are necessary for the teaching and learning endeavors of instructors and students to continue, and what your experience, as well as the images, might mean. (Note that a selection of these photographs and prompts for reflection or discussion are included in the online resource “[Close Reading and Observation Exercises](#).”)



**6.03**

*A book with notes on the lap  
of an interim president at an  
associate's institution.*



**6.04**

*A student gets assistance from the coordinator of a center for international student services at a baccalaureate institution.*



**6.05**

*The office doorway of the coordinator of a center for international student services at a baccalaureate institution.*



6.06

Outside the office of a faculty member in engineering at a master's institution.



By photographing and talking with faculty colleagues and their deans, I was also introduced to many of the contingent faculty members working in various departments at my own institution, including part-time, adjunct, and non-tenure-track faculty. Due to the rise of part-time faculty appointments in the United States and given that part-time and full-time contingent faculty outnumber tenured and tenure-track faculty across the spectrum of institution types (AAUP 2018), students are very likely to be taught by adjunct or part-time instructors from the beginning of college—they are a crucial part of students' higher education experience. Yet, many contingent faculty struggle to make ends meet in the US and elsewhere. In Japan, part-time lecturers, whose numbers have risen in recent decades, often teach at multiple institutions simultaneously, yet still count among the country's working poor (Kimie 2021). The situation is similar in the US, where part-time adjunct instructors comprise at least 40% of all faculty (Douglas-Gabriel 2019) and where the vast majority, 89 percent as of 2014, teach at more than one institution (House Committee on Education and the Workforce 2014). As *The Teaching and Learning Project* expanded to institutions across the US, contingent faculty remained a strong focus of the work. Given their sheer numbers, it makes sense that *The Teaching and Learning Project* features many contingent and part-time faculty doing impressive work—in teaching, service, and scholarship. Beyond their ubiquitous presence, though, two things stand out: first, their vital role is often misunderstood by their own full-time and tenure-track faculty colleagues. Second, perhaps as a result, students often misperceive the role and importance of part-time and contingent faculty, especially if students are able to observe distinct differences in an institution's engagement with or recognition of faculty according to employment status. This epidemic of misunderstanding and under recognition is playing out in the US in debates citing, for example, falsehoods such as the subversion of the professoriate by part-time hires (Scott 2020), which fail to recognize that contingent faculty are often doing the best

they can to serve students, with few resources and many hurdles. Similar lack of support and struggles are likewise documented among sessional instructors in Australia, New Zealand, the European Union, and the United Kingdom (Harvey 2017).

Leora Baron-Nixon gives sage advice to colleges and universities in their employment and engagement of part-time faculty. With an eye toward student success, she affirms that “to provide, support, or sustain quality educational programs, all faculty members need to be part of their institution’s creative, intellectual, and administrative fabric. To meet the challenge, an institution should create and foster an organizational climate and culture that are . . . inclusive” of all faculty. She goes on to describe an ideal state in which “the roles of all faculty who are engaged in teaching are identical” and “nonteaching roles of teachers, such as participation in institutional life, student advising, and professional contributions, are expected from and valued by all” (Baron-Nixon 2007, 15). The photographs of contingent faculty in *The Teaching and Learning Project* convey the ways in which part-time and contingent faculty members’ engagement with students, dedication to teaching, and participation in the life of the institution are as vibrant and crucial as those of their tenure-track colleagues. Yet, the photographs also highlight that these contributions are often made without dedicated office space or job security, through office hours in borrowed corners and briefly empty classrooms, while teaching dizzying schedules of classes at multiple institutions and online, in some cases alongside other jobs. I hope that seeing these contributions and difficulties lends a new urgency to calls for action to support non-tenure-track faculty more substantively and effectively. Academic staff, too, may feel their contributions to the life of teaching and learning in their institutions are hidden and underrecognized, yet in so many ways, the work of higher education could not happen without them, and *The Teaching and Learning Project* makes those contributions undeniably real. In the United States, the term “staff”

typically includes non-teaching roles, ranging widely across institutional functions: groundskeeping, information technology, residential support, accounting, and more. Academic staff members, as we will use the term within a US context, then, are non-faculty employees whose work is connected closely with academics: e.g., educational developers, librarians, administrative support personnel who organize and support other aspects of teaching such as scheduling, enrollment, and financial aid, and in some cases, depending on their self-identification, staff members in student affairs who work closely with students on academic support such as tutoring, coaching, and advising.

Academic staff tend to work in a liminal domain—a “betwixt and between” existence (Little and Green 2012) that defies clear role definitions and boundaries. On a practical level, academic staff may or may not hold secondary, part-time faculty appointments and they are often not included in governance and institutional decision-making, yet they work directly with students and teachers, supporting and contributing to the institution’s educational goals. They frequently find themselves “in the uncomfortable space between the administration and the faculty, carrying out the edicts of the former while trying to appease the latter” (Bessette 2020). Educational developers, a subset of this larger set of academic staff, often serve as a crucial “link between . . . disciplinary academics, academic leaders, administrators, national research project members, graduate teaching assistants, doctoral students, and other academic developers,” despite holding sometimes precarious and overlapping identities (Sutherland 2015, 209).

In the group of photographs that follows, images 6.08 – 6.16, part-time, full-time, adjunct, and tenure-track faculty, along with academic staff members, are shown engaged in various aspects of their work, some of which are rarely seen in images. How do the possibly contingent and liminal statuses of adjunct or part-time faculty and academic staff appear to you in these photographs? In what ways are those statuses visible or invisible?



**6.07**

*A faculty member in  
engineering at a master's  
institution works in his office  
at the end of the day.*



**6.08**

*A faculty member in history  
at a baccalaureate institution  
meets with a student in an  
unused classroom.*



**6.09**

*A faculty member in English  
at a baccalaureate institution  
quickly stops in his office  
between classes.*





**6.10**

*Faculty in biology hold a departmental meeting at a doctoral institution.*



**6.11-6.12**

*Sequence of two photographs:  
Faculty in philosophy meet as  
a department at an associate's  
institution.*





**6.13**

*A director of a center for teaching and learning at a doctoral institution consults with a teaching assistant.*



**6.14**

*A staff member in a center for teaching and learning at a doctoral institution conducts a session for faculty and graduate students during a teaching certificate program.*





**6.15**

*A director of a center for teaching and learning at a doctoral institution conducts a teaching consultation with a faculty member.*





**6.16**

*A librarian at a master's institution retrieves items from the institution's archives.*

Misperceptions about contingent faculty and staff are perhaps matched by misperceptions about higher level administrative leaders and the function of administration more broadly in supporting teaching and learning. In the United States, deans, provosts, presidents, and various vice, associate, and assistant versions of those positions, and in some cases directors and other roles, are counted among an institution's administration, and are generally charged with supporting, funding, evaluating, organizing, and improving teaching and learning, depending on the role. A lack of knowledge about colleagues' work and contributions to the teaching and learning endeavor across campus sectors frequently leads to breakdowns in communication and trust between administrators, faculty, and staff, yet communication and trust are two essential elements for people working together toward a common goal like student success.

This erosion of community in postsecondary institutions may be exacerbated by ever-growing changes to the faculty and staff workforce, such as the increase in part-time and contingent faculty and the addition of mid-level administrators (Kezar, DePaola, and Scott 2019). These changes can have a direct and negative impact on long-standing higher education structures, such as faculty shared governance. Kezar, DePaola, and Scott note that “these various trends taken together create a very different kind of academic community than has existed at any time in the past. Faculty and staff are turning over in their roles more than ever and are largely unavailable given their contingent and outsourced status. And interactions among faculty and staff are likely to be tainted by their low morale, declining satisfaction, and overall feelings of disengagement” (2019, 95).

Alongside these negative consequences, though, mid-level administrators are often needed to ensure that institutions comply with increasingly complex national and regional regulations. Ideally, such administrators also provide vital support to faculty and students, though their roles may be perceived as detracting from, rather than supporting, those playing a more direct instructional role. In a

similarly complicated way, contingent faculty may allow institutions to respond to changing student interests and enrollments more nimbly, even as their growing numbers raise concerns about instability, low pay, and lack of support. Despite these complexities, *The Teaching and Learning Project* frequently found members of all these groups to be highly engaged and dedicated—not “unavailable” at all, though not as connected as they could be, either. The community aspect of postsecondary work—creating an environment in which trust is maintained—is essential, and while imperfect, shows up in the efforts to connect across roles in the photographs. In images 6.17 – 6.23, what connections and disconnections between and among administrators, faculty, and staff stand out to you?



**6.17**

*Doors to the offices of the vice provost and general counsel at a doctoral institution.*



**6.18**

*A dean of allied health at an associate's institution speaks to a colleague during a staff meeting.*



**6.19**

*A dean of allied health assists an emergency medical technician student at an associate's institution.*



**6.20-6.21**

*Sequence of two  
photographs: A president  
at an associate's  
institution facilitates an  
interdepartmental meeting  
of staff and faculty.*





**6.22**

*An interim president at an associate's institution facilitates an interdepartmental meeting of staff and faculty.*



**6.23**

*A vice president for academic and student affairs at an associate's institution talks with staff in enrollment services.*

## Three Perspectives on Supporting Teaching

In an effort to provide a first-hand account of hidden work in higher education, I talked with three US college administrators who agreed to frank interviews provided their names not be used (personal communications with Martin Springborg, February 11, 2020 – March 9, 2020). They included a community college president, a community college vice president of academic affairs (a role equivalent to provost at many institutions in the US, or a deputy vice-chancellor in the UK), and a former college dean in a large public university. I asked each of them to address a common set of questions about their career path, institutional roles, and how current issues related to teaching in postsecondary education play out in their work. Prior to their current roles, they held a variety of tenure-track and contingent faculty appointments and administrative appointments in academic affairs, grants and research, technology, and online education. They represent administrative roles that traditionally work the most closely with faculty and provide support for teaching and learning. In elucidating the nature of hidden educational labor, these three administrators focused on why, how, and from whom their work and that of faculty and staff remains hidden; often-overlooked financial and workload burdens; and how to remedy these issues.

### Hidden Work

These administrators shared revealing perspectives on the hidden nature of their own work, as well as that of faculty and staff. Certain aspects of teaching and supporting students only became visible as their roles evolved. The president explained that “as I got further into my career, I started to get curious about other things that impacted students. . . . It challenged my ideas of my responsibility and where that ended.” The same president noted, “When I moved into [a] dean role, [I] had more of an appreciation for the resources everyone needs to teach

well,” and later, “as a [vice president I addressed] more questions, like how do you measure the value of what you do . . . and how do you measure the impact of [academic] programs?” Finally, “As president, [I’m] dealing with [the] board of trustees, policies, marketing and branding the institution, [and] legislators.” This president also realized how hard it is to retain the perspectives that were so close earlier in their teaching career, noting that “I have to work hard every day to keep [the] pulse of students” and regretting being “more detached from faculty than I’d like to be.”

It is striking how obscured each of these roles are from the views of virtually any other stations in postsecondary education; in parallel, photographs like those in images 6.26 – 6.29, showing closed-door administrative meetings, are very rarely portrayed publicly, contributing to these obscured perceptions of administrative work. The VP of academic affairs articulated more hidden administrative work in efforts to better support students: “It’s amazing how fast the institution has needed to change. A lot of that is on the shoulders of the upper leadership of an institution.” Despite the effort needed to make major changes, this administrator also lamented that “there really isn’t any awareness of higher education administration as work. [Administrators] have been portrayed . . . as guys in the office with a cigar—some kind of upper echelon of the institution with not a lot of accountability,” when nothing could be further from the truth. The VP of academic affairs noted wryly that “as a dean, you often have responsibility and accountability, but not authority.”

All three were acutely concerned about the under recognition of contingent faculty and academic staff at their institutions. Broadly, the president explained that “people who are drawn to higher education already have a passion for student learning and success. It would be great if we could recognize more people for what they do and support them. . . . We could do a better job recognizing peoples’ talents and gifts and ability to help students succeed.”

Two of the interviewees noted structural divides between contingent and tenure-track faculty. Pointing out that most faculty governance roles are held by tenure-track faculty, the VP of academic affairs observed that “faculty leadership makes decisions that are in the best interest of full-time faculty.” The president voiced additional dividing lines between full-time and part-time faculty, who “are in different bargaining units. . . . I think this needs to be fixed. It would build relationships across the college if there were more opportunities for these two groups to come together. Currently, part-time faculty are not invited to the table—to full-time faculty conversations”; part-time faculty “also get invited to other things on campus, but often those events are scheduled at times our part-time faculty cannot attend.”

Concern about public perception of educational labor (or lack thereof) was also evident. The former dean remarked that “the mass media . . . tends to misunderstand the nuances of the college experience for both faculty members and students. . . . Faculty members are often portrayed as having easy careers, with light and easy workloads, guaranteed jobs, high pay, and a similar lack of responsibility.” They also pointed out that “in the popular media, the work and issues of the part-time and/or adjunct faculty member receives little to no attention. This lack of attention probably stems from the same ignorance. . . . As with any labor issue, greater visibility is likely to result in positive change.” As *The Teaching and Learning Project* has done for other hidden dimensions of higher education, we hope that the photographs contribute to this type of change.





**6.24**

*A provost and vice president  
of academic affairs at an  
associate's institution works in  
her office.*





**6.25**

*A dean of allied health at an associate's institution walks to her office between meetings.*



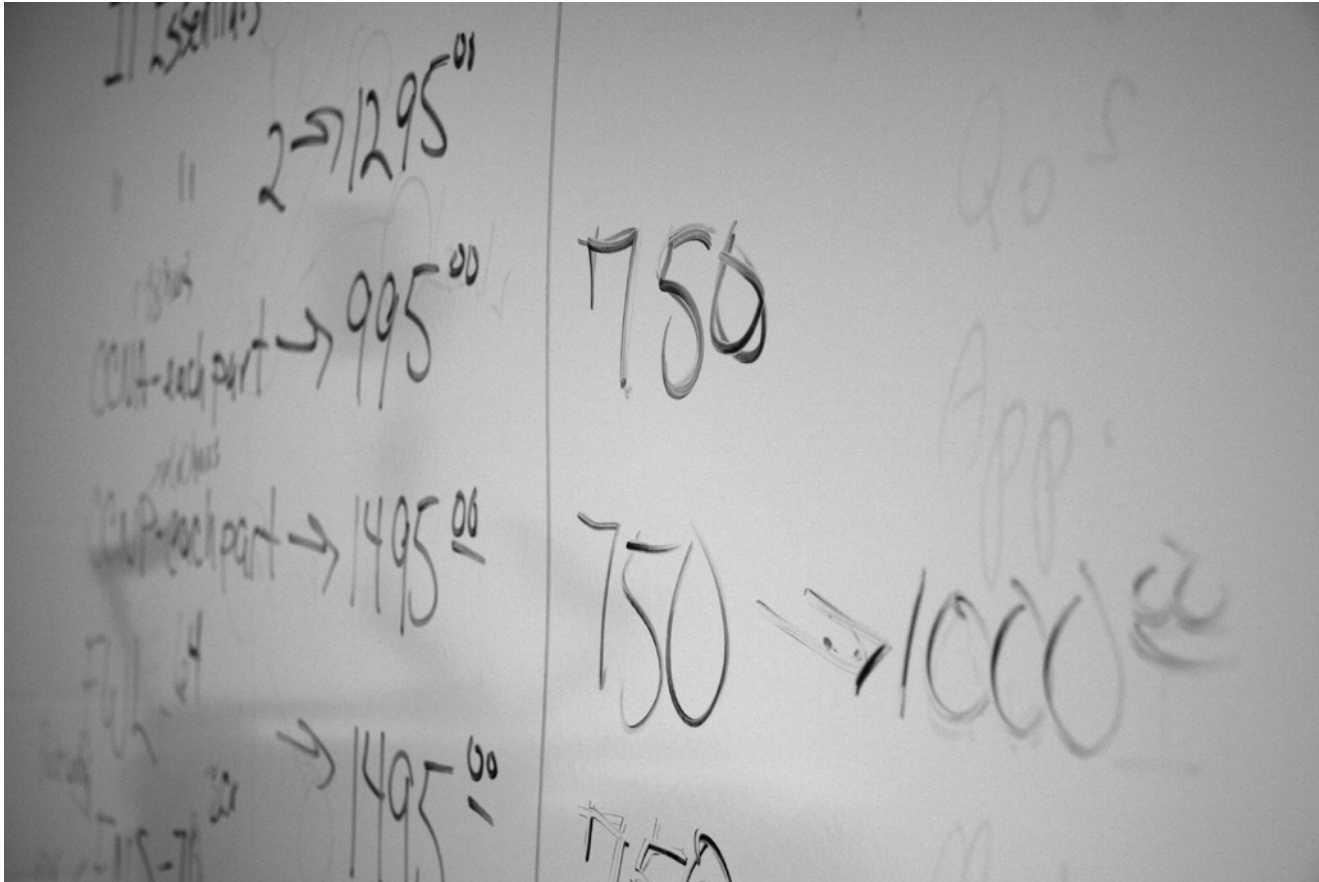
**6.26**

*Staff and administrators from several different offices meet at a doctoral institution.*



**6.27**

*A president consults with a staff member at an associate's institution.*



6.28

*A whiteboard during a budget meeting at an associate's institution.*



**6.29**

*A president and chief financial officer at an associate's institution talk before a faculty shared governance meeting.*

### **Workload and Finances**

These administrators had much to say about the intertwined problems of overwork and institutional finances, both of which function as additional hidden factors complicating the labor required to teach in postsecondary institutions. The former dean explained that “the current crisis seems to center on cost, return on investment for both students and society, and who should be financing a higher education. This focus requires institutions to be very cautious about the use of their fiscal resources, which sometimes results in an over-reliance on faculty members who are part-time or adjunct.” Also recognizing the injustice in relying on contingent instructors, the same former dean explained that “I have seen too many faculty members in the last twenty years or so that have had a very hard time making ends meet, through no fault of their own . . . because the institution would not hire them full-time—would not create a necessary position.”

The VP of academic affairs traced how institutional finances contribute to overwork: “We have a low rate of pay for adjuncts and faculty. These employees, as a result, keep up-taking work: overloads [and] working at other institutions in addition to their regular workload. It’s a challenge for any institution to find . . . the resources to pay faculty enough to keep them from needing to do this.” The president also explained that for academic work in their state, “there is no maximum workload. If the employee wants to work sixty hours [per week], they are allowed . . . so quality vs. quantity is a problem.” This overwork also detracts from the ability of institutions to break down silos and cultivate leadership from within; as this president explained, “Because faculty are teaching so much, it is harder for them to branch out into other aspects of the institution, [such as] accreditation efforts [and] administrative functions.” The VP of academic affairs testified to these challenges existing on top of an already increased expectation for faculty work, with a “notable progression in the amount of work administration expects of faculty over and above their teaching load.” Counter to the public perception

that faculty have it easy, many are on a trajectory of intractably increasing workloads, fueled by troubled financial support for higher education.

### **Strategies for Change**

The administrators I spoke with were highly engaged in thinking about and enacting changes to help reveal hidden aspects of postsecondary educational labor in multiple ways. The college president worked to ensure recognition for adjunct faculty through events: “We have great adjuncts. 90 percent have been with us for more than ten years. I give a talk at a special dinner we have for them. Every fall, we get together and talk about contracts, engagement (with them, with the college), and highlight the things they are doing.” The VP of academic affairs shared that faculty governance “is slowly changing—more adjuncts are represented in faculty shared leadership roles.”

Others focused on redefining roles to better meet modern needs in the higher education sector. The former dean had given this substantial thought: “The traditional tenure-track appointment of faculty members is important in meeting the goals of teaching, research, and service, but these faculty members can require a commitment from the institution that may not most appropriately meet the needs of either the institution or the students. We are starting to see more institutions hiring faculty members who are concentrated on teaching, with a lesser emphasis on research and service, yet still hired full time and with opportunities for promotion. This is a positive step.” Communication and shared planning can also play important roles in improving the environment for postsecondary teachers. This president shared one such approach for engaging faculty across appointment types, as well as staff, in the future of the institution: “I introduced the college to a one-year conversation process that . . . will focus on big questions including: What organizational structure do we need to achieve the results our students need to be successful? What roles and positions are needed or not need-



ed? How will we educate? When? Where? What will we teach?” While participating in strategic conversations like these takes time, it also has the potential to bring forth that same passion for student learning and success that the president also noted as a hallmark of those drawn to working in higher education, and it can build a truly shared investment across roles in forward-looking, creative, and strategic planning.

## Questions for Further Reflection

As you review the photographs in this chapter and throughout the book, as well as those you find online and in publications about higher education from your own institution and elsewhere, consider the work you observe in each frame:

- What signs or symbols show you, or hide from you, whether those doing the work are faculty, staff, or administrators?
- Can you tell which students are taught by contingent or tenure-track, part-time or full-time faculty?
- Where do you find evidence of silos being broken down or enforced, and a sense of community and collaboration being eroded or fostered?
- What other insights emerge for you about the nature of postsecondary educational work, hidden and revealed?