Dornsife Faculty Council Faculty Affairs Caucus
Final Report – 2016 / 2017

Benchmarking USC Dornsife Faculty Salaries:
Determining Peer Institutions

This document is in response to Academic Senate Resolution 15/16 07 mandating the development of a salary benchmarking proposal “to help determine the appropriate level of compensation for faculty at every stage, including appointment, promotion raises, merit-pay raises, and adjustments based on salary inequity, compression, or inversion.” Here we establish the predicate for the fuller report by determining the “external comparison groups” that are “appropriate and reasonable” for the benchmarking initiative. It is especially important, we argue, to place this effort within a much broader set of historical and academic contexts—in particular, the decades-long drive to cultivate the power and prestige of the modern American University system by filling classrooms and laboratories with a world-class professoriate. In earlier decades, those efforts were focused on the struggle for the nationwide adoption of tenure policies. Today, the pursuit of university excellence is being registered in the development of a strong, stable NTT professional track professoriate to complement the work of their tenure-track colleagues. In many ways, the conditions that gave rise to the tenure system in the mid-twentieth century are strikingly similar to those that obtain today. This analysis takes inspiration from the innovation of tenure, and should be read as an attempt to complement, support, and to protect that system, as well as to ensure the establishment of a strong untenured professional track here at USC.

The Erosion of Tenure and the Threat to Academic Freedom and University Prestige

It’s now a commonplace that the American academic workforce has dramatically changed in recent decades as the numbers of tenure and tenure-track professors have sharply declined. According to one study by USC Rossier’s Pullian Center for Higher Education: “In 1969, tenured and tenure-track positions made up approximately 78.3% of the faculty and non-tenure-track positions comprised about 21.7%. . . . [but by] 2009 these proportions had nearly flipped; tenured and tenure-track positions had declined to 33.5% and 66.5% of faculty were ineligible for tenure.”1 And of course, a dominant feature of non-tenure-track employment is shockingly low pay.2 There is wide agreement that this trend poses a serious threat to the health and integrity of the American university. More specifically, as the AAUP insists in its 2012-13

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1 Rossier’s Pullian Center for Higher Education
2 It is instructive to note that the low wage issue has become such a national concern that it is frequently discussed in both the academic and mainstream press. See “The Ever-Shrinking Role of Tenured College Professors (in 1 chart).” The Atlantic. April 10, 2013.
“Annual Report on the Economic Status of the Profession,” the erosion of tenure nationwide and “the increasing use of contingent appointments” has become a “threat to academic freedom and to the quality of instruction.” The situation has cultivated a class of “full-time non-tenure-track colleagues [that] effectively constitute a second tier of the academic labor force.” In short, as the tenure system declines nationwide it is being replaced by an unstable, bifurcated professoriate—one in which the endemic alienation of non-tenure-track professors is set against the anxieties of a shrinking class of tenured and tenure-track colleagues.

We are faced with two fundamental problems: One, the existential threat to academic freedom, the foundational value of the American university; and two, the exploitative wages paid to non-tenure-track professors by so many universities nationwide—and, the downward pressure those wage levels exert on tenure/tenure-track faculty. In truth, however, these are not two separate issues, but two inextricably linked aspects of a single problem. Kevin Birmingham made this connection forcefully in a much discussed article for The Chronicle of Higher Education, “The Great Shame of Our Profession,” writing that “thirty-one percent of part-time faculty members live near or below the poverty line. Twenty-five percent receive public assistance”. This is an unnerving fact in its own right, but even more troubling as the predicate for his next observation: “The privilege of tenure used to confer academic freedom through job security. By now, decades of adjunctification have made the professoriate fearful, insular, and conformist.” Of course, this picture neither completely nor fairly represents conditions here at USC Dornsife, as the recent vote against unionization—an explicit gesture of confidence in Provost Michael Quick and his assurance of reform—surely attest. But the stark conditions that obtain in other colleges and universities across the nation are a reminder that any proposal to remedy wage disparities at USC Dornsife must align itself with the original goals and purposes of tenure—heretofore the only institutional guarantor of academic freedom and faculty rights that the modern university has devised.

So, what does history tell us of the original goals and purposes of tenure? It is common today to regard tenure as one more ancient remnant of the mediaeval university, an ecclesiastical elevation, a system designed to honor achievement through the vestiture of academic privilege. Actually, it was an important twentieth century academic labor reform—and recruitment tool. It was never conceived as an attempt to codify an academic caste system. Rather, tenure policies (and accompanying salary reforms) were fundamentally an effort to secure academic freedom for all professors while cultivating the intellectual reputation of the American.

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university. And in the early twentieth century the greatest threat to academic freedom (and by extension, university prestige) was substandard pay and meagre job security. In 1970, the AAUP summed up the accumulated wisdom about tenure:

Tenure is a means to certain ends; specifically: (1) freedom of teaching and research and of extramural activities, and (2) a sufficient degree of economic security to make the profession attractive to men and women of ability. Freedom and economic security, hence, tenure, are indispensable to the success of an institution in fulfilling its obligations to its students and to society.5

And as Caitlin Rosenthal has shown, university presidents and administrators were especially interested in tenure as a recruitment tool, a way to secure competitive advantage over other universities, and thus bolster their university’s intellectual reputation. As James Grant of Harvard put it in 1938, tenure is “our only hope of recruiting men for this important service.”6 Moreover, it’s instructive to note that as reform movements go, tenure is relatively new. When it began its decline in the early 1970s, it was only 35 or 40 years old, and had only just then become widely adopted.7 The formal tenure system of today is younger than Social Security, roughly the same age as Medicare, and more fragile than both. And in ways analogous to those broader social reforms, tenure has worked by providing security, anchoring academic production within a stable institutional arrangement.

USC Dornsife and the Dual-Track Faculty Model

Universities across the country have responded to the upheaval in the academic labor force in different ways. Three distinct models have emerged: First, some colleges have adopted what might be called an “Ostrich model” in which they struggle for survival by capitalizing on their ability to employ low-wage “contingent” instructors, while remaining indifferent to the destructive long-term consequences of the practice. Second, other universities—most notably legacy institutions such as The University of Chicago, Northeastern, Tufts, and others—have acquiesced to what Michael Quick has termed the “industrial model.” These institutions have fostered the conditions that have made unionization inevitable—in particular, the apartheid

5 1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure with 1970 Interpretative Comments
7 Caitlin Rosenthal points out that in 1915, when the newly formed AAUP called on universities to adopt policies that promote “security of tenure” for professors, they still could not offer much guidance on what tenure meant or what policies would be necessary to formalize it. In 1935, a survey of seventy-eight universities revealed that fewer than half had implemented formal tenure policies—and even those tended to be “weak and indeterminate by modern standards.” The meaning of tenure did not begin to stabilize until 1940 when the AAUP codified its position in its Statement of Principles, and formal tenure policies did not become the norm until the 1960s and early 1970s—at the precise moment when the actual practice of tenure began to erode.
policies that not only deny their non-tenure-track faculty meaningful governing rights, but also exploit them economically with unconscionably low wages.

In stark contrast to these two models, in the last several years USC Dornsife has initiated policies that, in effect, draw the outlines of a third, far more progressive faculty model: dual track. While preserving the traditional tenure track, Dornsife has increasingly codified the elements of a “professional track” system running parallel to the tenure system. These elements include the conferment of rank and title, opening up university governance to RTPC faculty, rigorous promotion and retention protocols, the increased recognition of professional track faculty contributions in scholarship and service, the expanded access to scholarship support programs, and the use of (slightly) longer-term, more stable contract arrangements. A key feature of the professional track appears to be mutually beneficial flexibility. More flexible contracts enable the university to innovate quickly in response to the fast changing educational needs of the 21st century while also giving it greater agility to develop long-term strategic plans. At the same time, flexible contracts also serve the needs of professional track professors: while not being contractually obligated to produce traditional scholarship, they are still rewarded for their achievements in an expanded array of intellectual and creative forms of production, from traditional scholarship to work in newly emerging digital venues. These far-sighted reforms have been extremely encouraging! They have the potential to invigorate the core of USC Dornsife intellectual life, and magnify its international reputation. But, as Provost Quick has said repeatedly, there is work left to be done. A professional track that is vested with the trappings of academic distinction and responsibility—but marked by a weak salary structure—will eventually devolve into another form of second class academic citizenship. From inside and out, it will be seen as merely window dressing on an attempt to shave dollars off the bottom line. And it will do nothing to enhance USC Dornsife’s national reputation.

**Peer Institution Comparative: USC Dornsife—The Best Small Liberal Arts College in the Nation and R1 Research Institutions**

Determining appropriate peer institutions for benchmarking Tenure/Tenure-Track faculty is a straightforward matter: clearly, to maintain Dornsife’s position as one of the nation’s leading universities, the only proper comparison are R1 research institutions such as UCLA, Stanford, Northwestern, NYU, and the Ivy league universities. The very novelty of USC Dornsife’s Professional Track might have made the search for appropriate external comparisons for RTPC faculty more difficult were it not for the guidance of the late Steven B. Sample. In his “Annual Address the Faculty” in 2006, President Sample reflected on the ways USC’s transformation into a residential university would “strengthen and enhance USC’s academic programs.” He observed that a “residential campus makes it easier to foster closer academic relationships between students and faculty”; a condition that “supports USC’s efforts to give our students a
small-college experience inside a large, urban research university.” And he underscored the point that a “residential campus makes it easier to recruit not only the best students, but the best faculty as well.”

President Sample had it exactly right.

Today, Steven Sample’s “impossible dream” is fast becoming a reality. Indeed, we submit that the faculty model in small liberal arts colleges offers a near perfect analogue to the one taking shape here at USC. This is not merely an aspirational point, but an empirically grounded one: while faculty in liberal arts colleges are tenure or tenure-track, their role is fundamentally identical to that of Dornsife’s RTPC faculty. First, like professors at liberal arts colleges, RTPC faculty teach a high-performing undergraduate population, and do so in a way that emphasizes close, individualized student/professor engagement. At roughly 50% of the Dornsife faculty, RTPC professors inevitably shape the undergraduate experience for all students. Moreover, the range of subject matter and the level of sophistication of the undergraduate courses taught by RTPC faculty are comparable to those taught by our liberal arts college colleagues—a point applicable even to the various “skills” courses taught in Dornsife. (In The Writing Program, for example, ALL WRITING COURSES are content-specific, with sections devoted to economics, the law, health sciences, environmental studies, the fine arts, political discourse, and many others.)

Second, like professors at liberal arts colleges, Dornsife’s RTPC faculty perform the same manner of service typical of professors in elite institutions everywhere, from actively participating at all levels of faculty governance to interacting with students in a host of extracurricular activities designed to enrich student experience, to participating in a wide variety of community outreach programs.

Third, like professors at liberal arts colleges, Dornsife’s RTPC faculty are productive scholars and participants in the intellectual life of both campus and community. RTPC faculty regularly publish traditional academic books and articles on an impressive range of topics, and frequently present at the most important academic conferences in their discipline. But perhaps more significantly, RTPC faculty also engage in an extraordinary range of alternative forms of intellectual production—innovative work that takes full advantage of the new technologically democratized discursive environments ill-suited for more traditional forms of scholarship.

Ironically, in the past much of this intellectual production had been deliberately left off of merit review files because department chairs and program directors deemed such material irrelevant to the work of “mere instructors”. Fortunately this is no longer the case. Even so, however, it is instructive to consider why RTPC faculty would conduct research, publish, and engage in a

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8 In The Writing Program, for example, it is common (indeed, expected) that professors devote 3-4 hours per student in individualized, one-on-one conferences.
myriad of other intellectual activities, even when believing their work would not be rewarded—or even seen—by their university. And the answer is simple: The vast majority of us hold terminal degrees, and most of those are doctorates. Indeed, we are trained by the very same institutions that graduated our liberal arts college colleagues—or, for that matter, our T/TT colleagues here at USC. And like them, we did not see advanced education as just another “job training program.” Few people, we imagine, would invest the time, energy, and expense to earn a Ph.D. just to earn as much—or less—than a high school teacher. No, RTPC professional track faculty are motivated by the same intellectual curiosity and desire to live the life of the mind as our tenure and tenure-track partners. This proposal is one sure way to help USC Dornsife take the fullest advantage of those energies.

Implementation

We recognize that implementing this proposal will require careful budgetary planning. But the implementation process should not undermine fundamental objectives. Respectfully, we recommend the following guidelines:

1. Adhere to a relatively short phase-in. If initial salary adjustments cannot be made in a single fiscal year, we believe it would be unwise to extend the process beyond two years. Any delay beyond two years, especially if some faculty groups are prioritized over others, will inevitably breed resentment.
2. All impacted faculty should immediately receive some degree of salary adjustment, but junior faculty (lecturer and assistant professor) should be prioritized.
3. Avoid salary compression. Management theorists and labor economists routinely point out that salary compression harms morale and undermines productivity. Similarly, they also agree that the longer it persists the more difficult it is to correct. We strongly suggest that these benchmarking recommendations be coupled with an adjustment mechanism by which existing salaries are recalculated according to the length of time served at the current rank. We suggest 1.5% per year over the benchmark rate.
4. Use a non-merit based adjustment appeal process. We fully understand that ordinarily, salary increases are merit-based. We do not challenge that practice. But as essential as merit rewards are, benchmarking is designed to achieve other objectives and should be a distinct process.

Towards A “Transformational” USC Dornsife Faculty

In this report we’ve endeavored to situate the determination of appropriate peer institution comparisons for benchmarking USC Dornsife’s RTPC faculty salaries within the broader structural problems that plague the academic workforce throughout higher education. In doing so, we argue that this proposal supports and protects the tenure system by substantially
reducing the economic disincentive to make tenure appointments. In sum, this proposal—and the professional-track faculty model it helps complete—addresses the needs of both tenure and professional track professors, effectively bringing them together as full partners in the pursuit of the university’s historic goals. The significance of this last point cannot be overstated. In his 2010 inaugural address, USC President Max Nikias called for the development of a “[t]ransformational faculty whose reputation for productivity will place USC at the vanguard of every intellectual revolution.” We strongly believe that RTPC professional track faculty has an indispensable role to play in advancing that goal. The pursuit of excellence is an “all-hands-on-deck” mission. This model puts the entire faculty to work building USC into a powerhouse of intellectual production.

The transformational impact of USC Dornsife’s faculty model would surely extend beyond the boundaries of its own campus. It would, of course, secure USC’s competitive advantage in the academic labor market. And by extension, it would inevitably burnish USC’s reputation as a progressive and enlightened academic employer—a reputation unfortunately sullied in the past two years. But it is also likely that the USC Dornsife faculty model would quickly become the national gold standard for achieving faculty excellence. If, as seems apparent, some form of a professional track model is the wave of the future for America’s elite institutions, proposals such as this will define that trend and, ultimately, redefine higher education in the new century. And this, we submit, is an opportunity ripe for USC leadership.