

naturejobs

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Adjunct and contingent faculty members at universities face trying times. Already fighting for job security, they face an economic downturn that has made their positions even more precarious. These contract workers often have modest salaries and lack benefits. And the proportion of adjuncts versus tenured or tenure-track faculty at US universities — including in the sciences — has grown along with the desire for a flexible and potentially cheaper professorial workforce (see *Nature* **445**, 678–679; 2007). According to a 2007 survey by the US Department of Education, 52% of the higher-education workforce is now either full-time non-tenure-track faculty or part-time/adjunct faculty.

A new US coalition aims to give these staff members a voice. The tentatively named National Coalition of Adjunct Equity formed during a teleconference of 14 adjuncts at US universities. The recession helped trigger the organization's inception, according to co-chair Maria Maisto, an associate lecturer in English composition at the University of Akron, Ohio.

Could the new body help? It couldn't hurt. Other US organizations already fight for adjunct rights, such as the American Federation of Teachers, which includes adjuncts in its labour union, and the American Association of University Professors, which is drafting guidelines for universities on how they can convert part-time faculty members to full time.

But these bodies are not devoted solely to adjunct concerns. "Interests of tenure-track people are not always in line with non-tenure-track," says Maisto, adding that some states make it difficult to unionize. "We wanted to put together an organization with no official position on unions."

But there's even more at stake. When employees lack security or influence, they tend to take fewer risks and not challenge the status quo. More adjuncts means more professors unwilling to present potentially innovative ideas to department heads, a tendency detrimental to institutions and students. A new organization that can help counter this trend would indeed be worthwhile.

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