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A Limited Time Offer: Exploring Adjunct, Visiting, and Fixed-Term Positions

Austin Trantham¹, Connor J.S. Sutton²,
Margaret Mary Ochner³, & Jennifer Lamm⁴

1. Saint Leo University 2. Anderson University 3. Montclair State University 4. Texas State University

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Introduction

The diversity of non-tenure track (NTT) positions means there is no one-size-fits-all advice for graduate students in or considering such positions. However, we argue there are general principles that should be followed to maximize the utility of these roles in pursuing career and vocational goals. We first define and describe the roles and types of NTT positions and describe how graduate students should view NTT positions from both professional and personal perspectives. This chapter details the potential benefits and drawbacks of these positions to better prepare graduate students to navigate the NTT market. We illuminate crucial skills and experiences in NTT positions and highlight strategies for success in NTT roles for students throughout their graduate education and job search, as well as in leveraging these positions to obtain more secure positions. These include being strategic in choosing NTT positions and being strategic once in NTT positions. These positions can be extremely useful in developing teaching skills, building a marketable CV, networking, and assessing vocational goals, but these appointments are also often tenuous, low-wage, and time consuming. Hiring term-limited faculty is less regulated than the process for hiring tenure-track personnel. Like the market for postdocs, the NTT labor is “less transparent, less equitable, making it a bottleneck for improving diversity in disciplines as scholars move to more senior positions in the academe, a phenomenon known as the “leaky pipeline” (APSA 2005). Considering these factors, graduate students should be deliberate when considering NTT positions. Our goal is to guide students in developing realistic expectations for job searches during graduate school and enlighten students on core considerations in selecting positions.

What Do You Need to Know?

It is necessary to define and identify types of NTT positions prior to applying, as there are not only different hiring requirements, but different skills, benefits, and various other factors. For simplicity, we will discuss limited-term, part-time teaching positions under the umbrella term of “non-tenure track” or “NTT” positions pursuant to the American Political Science Association’s (APSA) occupational studies of the discipline. NTT positions encapsulate a wide variety of teaching opportunities, including terms that frequently appear in job listings, as illustrated in Figure 44.1. The commonality between these positions is the fact that they are for a “fixed term” where the university is under no obligation to rehire at

the end of the contract period unless stipulated otherwise.

Figure 44.1: Common Characteristics of NTT Positions

Position Title	Defining Characteristics
Adjunct Faculty	Temporary position that is paid a set rate to teach one or more courses in an individual semester. Based on departmental need/student demand.
Assistant Teaching Professor	Position primarily focused on teaching or teaching/service duties. May be eligible for eventual promotion to Associate and Full Teaching Professor.
Instructor	Most general term - implies nothing about education level or contact type. Typically lacking a terminal degree (PhD or equivalent) in the relevant field of study. Focused on classroom teaching.
Instructor or Professor of Practice	Positions for those with master's, PhD, JD, etc. Practitioners are sometimes hired on the basis of non-academic work and may include administrative duties (e.g., director of policy center, etc., usually 12-month contract)
Professional-Track Appointment	Position that focuses more on quality classroom instruction and service and does not require meeting defined benchmarks for scholarship/research output (e.g., usually 9-month contract.)
Visiting Instructor/Lecturer	Temporary appointment given to one without terminal degree. May be eligible for renewal for multiple semesters or academic years.
Visiting Assistant Professor	Appointment covering initial set-time frame but may be extended if needed. Preferred terminal degree (PhD/equivalent), but "All But Dissertation" (ABD) candidates may be considered.

As illustrated in *Figure 44.1*, NTT positions vary and are individually defined by institutions. This list is by no means exhaustive, as institutions continue to develop and proliferate fewer traditional tenure-track roles. We speculate that more of these roles will arise, especially with the rapid changes in integration of technology over traditional classroom settings. We recommend that applicants thoroughly review the hiring institution's faculty handbook in order to understand their rights and responsibilities as an NTT professor before accepting an appointment.

What does this mean?

Job Pipeline

Although many students do not begin a graduate program in political science with the goal of obtaining NTT employment upon graduation, it is important to understand how these academic appointments fit into the occupational landscape. If you aspire to a career in academia, it is more likely than not that you, members of your graduate cohort, and/or future colleagues will assume an NTT role at some point in your career, either during graduate school or upon completion. APSA's 2018-2020 job placement report illustrates that about one-half of graduates accept NTT appointments as "their first placement" after completing their PhD. Thus, it is crucial that applicants understand the stark differences between NTT and traditional tenure-track positions.

Qualifications for NTT Positions

It is worth noting that the labor markets for tenure and NTT academic appointments are highly distinctive. Hiring practices for NTT faculty are less stringent, and fewer credentials are necessary for appointment. Typically, hiring decisions for NTT's are made at the departmental level without significant involvement from higher-level university officials. Depending on the specific NTT position, the institution usually requires very limited, if any, research or writing expectations. NTTs do not always need a PhD, though some post-graduate degree is typically required. Relevant teaching and research experience in your field may be important, but often less so for tenure-track appointments. Thus, the NTT applicant may not have to submit the variety of scholarly materials (e.g., teaching philosophy and

student evaluations) required for a tenure-track application, and the process may move quickly. (For additional information about application materials, see chapter 43.)

Benefits and Compensation

Full-time employment as faculty typically involves a consistent, simplified schedule, set office hours, and location on a daily basis. Additionally, it provides for health insurance, retirement plans, and increased job security. Therefore, the difference between working full versus part-time at an institution cannot be under emphasized. While part-time educators must perform many of the same duties as full-time faculty, the compensation offered is significantly less than that of full-time appointments. NTTs are typically not salaried but paid by semester, course, or credit hours. Additionally, there are often more stringent limitations on the number of classes a part-time NTT professor can teach per semester. This data should not be discouraging but serve as a guide for effectively planning your career choices.

Why Does It Matter?

How to View the Increase in Temporary Positions

The sharp increase in NTT faculty positions in political science (and higher education generally) over the last decade lends credence to the discussion within this chapter. This development should be considered by anyone assessing their career prospects in higher education, especially those who desire to teach. (For more general information about the political science job market, see chapter 34.) NTT appointments provide opportunities for candidates to gain teaching experience, build rapport, and focus on developing a publication record before applying to tenure-track positions. Because the NTT and tenure-track markets are intertwined, it benefits the applicant to understand the role of NTT educators in the discipline.

Opportunity Value

NTT appointments can be an excellent method for gaining practical experience in the profession. Developing pedagogical skills while completing temporary teaching assignments provides concrete evidence of classroom competence when applying for tenure-track positions. Thus, though an NTT role offers less financially, the opportunity for practice is invaluable. However, if one desires an alternative career path to academia or as a staff member (e.g., student advisor), but also enjoys faculty work or is uncertain where their passions lie, an initial NTT position can be a pathway toward future work. This experience allows the educator to fulfill vocational and personal goals, including staying current on changing trends in higher education while working with students and learning from their perspectives. Similarly, because NTT positions often have limitations regarding how many courses any employee can teach during any given semester, this allows the new teacher the opportunity to focus in-depth on crafting and completing one course, which is a rare opportunity. On the other hand, an NTT position can also lead to a “career” NTT. Though difficult to obtain and maintain, teachers may end up juggling NTT positions at several universities. Additionally, ad hoc teaching can be a supplement to non-academic vocations and these opportunities increase as new online mediums become more widely available.

What Will I Teach?

Graduate students should consider how these factors affect the job itself. It cannot be overstated that the appointments and specific assignments of full-time instructors (especially those with tenure) take precedence over NTT faculty. This means that fixed-term instructional appointments may be sporadic and may only be finalized weeks before the start of a given semester. Some NTT instructors are assigned courses after students have enrolled. This can be intimidating, but it is the nature of NTT work. Because of these factors, NTT faculty must be extremely flexible as course schedules may be assigned, changed, and/or removed quickly. Course preparation in drafting syllabi, creating assignments, and learning new subject matter is often extremely labor intensive, often on short notice.

Depending on the appointment, an NTT instructor may not have a choice in what class or classes

they will teach, nor the textbook or supplementary materials used to teach it. NTTs are sometimes provided with samples and expected to teach the class a certain way or adopt a former professor's syllabi. However, other NTT positions may require the professor (who may have never taught, nor even taken, the course themselves) to develop relevant curricula and assignments and find scholarly materials on short notice. Often, instructors must teach themselves some of the subject matter at a rapid pace in order to effectively teach the course. Understanding and accepting these uncertainties should be considered when applying for NTT positions, and candidates should ensure this aligns with existing personal and professional obligations.

How Will I Teach?

Course assignments may be given in a wide array of instructional modalities. Non-traditional instruction is increasingly common. Online courses may include hybrid elements and may be conducted either synchronously or asynchronously. This may be beneficial in an NTT position, as it allows the professor increased autonomy while widening the range of available teaching positions without requiring travel. As early-career educators should know, teaching is perfected over time. The online element also creates unique challenges. Thus, before accepting an NTT position, it is important to consider individual practices regarding the use of instructional technology, creating innovative assignments, timely grading of student work, and ensuring equity and inclusivity in the classroom (For additional tips and suggestions, see chapters 29 and 30). Much of this is university-dependent and may continue to change and develop over time. Thus, flexibility is key, and it is wise to keep up to date on best practices in non-traditional classroom settings.

Finally, the impact of exogenous events on NTT employment should be mentioned. Depending on the location, instructors may be forced to accommodate for a hurricane, tornado, or other severe weather event disrupting the normal course schedule. Traditional classes may switch unexpectedly to a virtual modality due to a public health crisis and subsequent concerns of spreading illness in shared spaces or canceled altogether due to institutional financial cuts because of an economic recession or depression. These events may increase or decrease opportunities for NTT positions but often cannot be predicted and are outside the control of those in or seeking these roles.

What Should/Can You Do?

Given the significant financial and vocational challenges of term-limited work, as well as the time required to succeed in these positions, graduate students need to be strategic in two primary ways. First, they must be strategic in choosing NTT positions, and ensure they know the explicit purpose that any position(s) may serve in reaching their educational and vocational goals. Secondly, graduate students also need to be strategic once in NTT positions and make these positions as useful as possible in advancing their professional goals.

Strategy for Choosing Term-Limited Positions

There are significant benefits to NTT positions. NTT appointments are a low-stakes opportunity for self-assessment to see if teaching is a vocational calling. These positions allow individuals to teach and prepare classes that they may not have had the opportunity to—especially if a student did not have funding opportunities tied to being an instructor of record. Individuals have unique reactions to their first classroom experiences. For some, it confirms their vocational skills and career goals. For others, they realize working with undergraduates in the classroom should not be the defining feature of their career and would prefer more research-oriented positions, to work with graduate students, or pursue non-academic professions. (For additional information about your first teaching experience, see chapter 29.) Beyond vocation, NTT positions also make graduates more competitive on the job market, giving the chance to practice and reflect on teaching philosophies, compile evidence of teaching effectiveness (new syllabi, student evaluations, teaching demo lectures), and network with potential future collaborators, mentors, and employers.

Graduate students should also be strategic in saying no to certain opportunities. Given the diversity of term-limited positions, there is no one universal standard for making this decision. Full time NTT positions may provide competitive compensation while achieving opportunities for professional and personal development. Other positions pay very little without benefits for the same end on an ad hoc basis. Graduate students should be realistic in their assessment of opportunities. Some take term-limited positions and end up in tenure-track positions. However, this is hardly a rule. These positions should be considered for what they are, as defined in employment contracts, rather than what they could be. It is tempting to choose a position because it could become what they want it to be, but graduate students must prioritize timely completion of degrees and the pursuit of sustainable employment and vocation.

Figure 44.2: Dos and Don'ts for NTT Positions

Strategy in Choosing NTT Positions	Strategy in NTT Positions
Make vocational decisions	Cultivate mentors in teaching and scholarship
Recognize financial realities	Develop transferable course materials backed up outside of an institutional learning management system (LMS) - e.g., Blackboard, Canvas, Moodle, D2L, etc.
Consider NTT positions as means to an end	Build teaching philosophy with practical examples
Evaluate CV gaps for marketability	Compile evidence of teaching effectiveness
Prioritize degree completion and tenure-track (or non-academic equivalent) positions	Be effective but do not be perfect
Say "no" when appropriate	Design courses that minimize instructor time commitment while meeting pedagogical goals
Consider viable alternatives to NTT positions	Have explicit and purposeful boundaries

Strategy During Term-Limited Positions

NTT faculty need to be strategic once in these positions and maximize their utility. For the NTT instructor, perfect is the enemy of good. Many are called to teach because they love it and want to be the best teacher possible. Given the realities of NTT positions—variable pay, limited security, opportunity cost—it is not always advantageous to be the “best version” of a teacher. Rather than being the perfect teacher, they should focus on being the most pragmatic teacher. Instructors should be purposeful in approaching these positions as they are tremendous opportunities to hone teaching skills, develop reusable content, network with new colleagues, pedagogically experiment, and learn new subjects. Instructors should put in time and effort in teaching, but do not strive for perfection. This is the most difficult lesson for someone who considers themselves a teacher-scholar, in that order. This means prioritizing teaching in NTT positions to improve their lot in securing more sustainable appointments.

As there is not a one-size-fits-all model, we provide general considerations to make the most of NTT positions. First, build and maintain any and all teaching materials for portability (independent of the institutional LMS). Second, recognize instructors do not need to be masters of topics they teach. It is okay to be one step ahead of undergraduates, knowing that subsequent iterations will be better. Third, think about positions in terms of building teaching portfolios. The best teaching philosophies develop when practiced and when defended with evidence of teaching effectiveness. Fourth, know when to say “no.” NTT positions may call for non-compensated work—informal/formal advising, lesson planning,

curriculum drafting, faculty meetings, and mandatory training. Knowing what the benefits of these tasks vis-a-vis objectives is essential to knowing when to say no. Set personal and professional boundaries. Lastly, NTT positions often are less “plugged-in” than tenure-track positions and departments are less likely to invest in NTT professional development. This means that people in these positions must be more purposeful in pursuing networking and mentorship opportunities. These relationships may yield rich rewards but must be actively pursued (for a larger discussion, see chapter 7).

Conclusion

The direction of the field and market means that more political science graduate students will have to consider NTT positions in various forms. As such, students seeking careers in academia should be strategic while considering and applying for NTT positions. This is a highly personalized and fact-dependent choice, and graduates should keep their professional goals in mind while making decisions. NTT positions are excellent opportunities to be the instructor of record, to develop teaching skills, build their resume, and make informed decisions about their vocational preferences. Students need to be strategic once in NTT positions. These opportunities can be used either as a springboard towards a more permanent teaching career or appreciated for what they are. However, we encourage students to make strategic considerations when accepting or refusing potential job opportunities based on the strategies detailed above, as well as realistic standards for the job market.

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