

The Pandemic, Contingent Faculty, and Catholic Colleges and Universities

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Abstract

In this paper, we explore the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on contingent faculty in Catholic higher education. As a baseline for comparison, we draw on our 2019 essay which traced the increasing reliance on contingent faculty in Catholic higher education from 2001-2017. When compared to 2020, we find three significant results. First, Catholic colleges and universities responded to the pandemic by reducing all employment—administration, staff, tenured/tenure-track faculty, and contingent faculty. In this general reduction, contingent faculty was reduced by 2.6%. Second, the reduction in employment was particularly pronounced in small Catholic schools. At these schools, contingent faculty was reduced by 10.7%. Third, surprisingly, the reduction in contingent faculty was 5.2% for men, whereas for women it was reduced by 0.7%

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In the immediate aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, U. S. colleges and universities were forced to move to online instruction and then faced declining enrollments, empty residence halls, and greatly reduced athletic schedules. These changes significantly lowered the revenue of these institutions of higher education. To address this financial loss, colleges and universities cut contingent faculty, many institutions by more than half (June and O’Leary). Women were hit particularly hard by these forces. As primary schools and daycare centers closed, women took on greater responsibilities for childcare and, as a result, reduced their presence in the economy, including in higher education (McMillen). The experience was so difficult for faculty that a third (35%) considered changing jobs and another third (38%) considered retiring (*The Chronicle* 11).

As institutions of higher education, Catholic colleges and universities were subject to the same pandemic-related forces affecting other institutions. They are a subset of higher education in the United States, with roughly 225 four-year schools across the country, so, like other schools, they struggled with loss of revenue, smaller enrollments, empty residence halls, and fewer athletic events. Even so, because they are Catholic, these colleges and universities should be committed to a tradition that emphasizes the rights and dignity of workers. According to the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace’s *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church*, work “is essentially ordered to and has its final goal in the human person” (no. 272). Thus, to protect the dignity of the person as worker, laborers must be justly compensated, have benefits that include retirement and medical insurance (no. 301), and, of relevance to contingent faculty, have the ability “to reach satisfactory levels of employment” (no. 288). Within their work, as with all of life, there is to be equality “among all people, regardless of their race, nation, sex, origin, culture, or class” (no. 144).

In this paper, we draw on data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) to explore the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on contingent faculty in Catholic higher education. As a baseline for comparison, we draw on trends that we reported in our 2019 essay, which traced the increasing reliance on contingent faculty in Catholic higher education from 2001-2017 (Herr, Cavallo, and King). We then compare these trends with data from 2020 to understand the impact the pandemic had on faculty in Catholic higher education. We find three significant results. First, Catholic colleges and universities responded to the pandemic by reducing all employment—administration, staff, tenured/tenure-track faculty, and contingent faculty. In this general reduction, contingent faculty was reduced by 2.6%. Second, the reduction in employment was particularly pronounced in small Catholic schools. At these schools, contingent faculty was reduced by 10.7%. Third, surprisingly, men fared worse than women at Catholic schools. The

reduction in contingent faculty was 5.2% for men whereas for women it was reduced by 0.7%. Since these effects were felt across Catholic higher education, although most significantly at small Catholic schools, it seems that the exigencies of the pandemic were stronger than commitments to mission.

Background

Contingent faculty have been on the rise since the late 1970's. As the AAUP has observed, the rise in contingent faculty occurred alongside a rise in the number of women and part-time instructional staff in the late 1970s (AAUP). More recently, "The Employment Status of Instructional Staff Members in Higher Education," released in 2011 and updated in 2014, brought this issue to the foreground in higher education (Curtis). The report concluded that the increase in contingent faculty had continued to rise and then stood at 70% of the professoriate. The Coalition on the Academic Workforce reaffirmed this statistic in its own analysis ("A Portrait of Part-Time Faculty Members").

In "The Data and Ethics of Contingent Faculty at Catholic Colleges and Universities," we studied the rise of contingent faculty in Catholic higher education, compared it to the rise of higher education overall and then sought to explain the rise within Catholic schools. We were trying to see if there was a difference in these schools because of their labor commitments found in Catholic Social Teaching expressed in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church*. We discovered that Catholic schools did have a lower percentage of contingent faculty in their ranks than non-Catholic colleges and universities. From 2001-2017, the percentage of contingent faculty at Catholic schools increased from 22.2% to 30.6% (Herr, Cavallo, King 172). While this is significantly lower than the AAUP 2014 analysis of 70% contingent faculty, much of this divergence comes from a comparison of dissimilar institutions. The AAUP analysis includes 2-year colleges and for-profit colleges, and there are no for-profit Catholic schools and only a handful of 2-year colleges. To correct for this, we removed these schools from our dataset and found that the percentage of contingent faculty at Catholic colleges and universities is roughly 5% lower than at non-Catholic schools (173). It was a real difference but not as profound a difference as a superficial analysis might suggest.

Even so, contingent faculty increased in Catholic higher education over the previous two decades, growing 10% during this time (173). When we delved further into the data, we found three significant dynamics related to the use of contingent faculty (179-184). First, gender played a key role. Holding other factors constant, the contingent faculty percentage for women was 7.6% higher than for men. Second, the contingent faculty percentage was inversely related to Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) students. In other words, holding other factors constant, an increase in students was related to a decrease in the percentage of contingent faculty. Finally, the

use of contingent faculty differed between larger Catholic schools with Carnegie classifications 15-20 (Doctoral Universities and Master's Colleges and Universities) and smaller Catholic schools with Carnegie classifications of 21-23 (Baccalaureate Colleges).

We saw two main differences between these two classifications of Catholic schools. First, the FTE student effect at the smaller schools was more pronounced than at larger schools. At smaller schools, an increase in FTE of 37 students was associated with a 1% decrease in the percentage of contingent faculty. At larger schools, it took an increase of 1,400 students to elicit the same 1% decrease in contingent faculty. Second, at smaller schools an increase in administrators was related to a decrease in contingent faculty percentage. We found an opposite relationship at larger schools; namely, the contingent faculty percentage increased with more administrators.

To summarize, our previous analysis showed that, on the whole, Catholic colleges and universities relied on fewer contingent faculty than their non-Catholic peers. While this could partly be attributed to the labor commitments of these schools, the deeper analysis suggested a more complicated conclusion. Larger schools seemed to hire more expensive administrators that reduced resources for tenure-track lines, and a larger number of students were needed to reduce reliance on contingent faculty. For smaller schools, administrators were more likely to be those who helped with recruitment and retention and so generated more resources for tenure-track lines. Moreover, just a small number of students would increase the resources for these small schools and thereby reduce contingency for faculty. The key dynamic shared across these two classifications of Catholic schools was women were more likely to be contingent faculty than men.

This was the state of contingent faculty in Catholic higher education when the Covid-19 pandemic hit the United States. Given that contingent faculty lack tenure protections, their employment depends upon the vagaries of institutional enrollment. Thus, it is unsurprising that initial reports suggested that colleges and universities responded to the pandemic with a reduction in the number of contingent faculty and that this reduction significantly impacted women. In this paper, we set out to explore if these effects are similar for Catholic higher education and how these effects compare to our previous analysis that covered 2001-2017.

Data and Analysis

To gain an understanding of the situation in Catholic higher education, we utilized IPEDS. These data sets provide comprehensive data for all schools offering Title IV federal financial aid to their students. The data include information that enables us to track tenured and tenure-track faculty, contingent faculty, and faculty gender. The data also include Carnegie classifications of schools and a subcategory for Catholic schools. Our analysis focuses on colleges and universities in Carnegie classifications

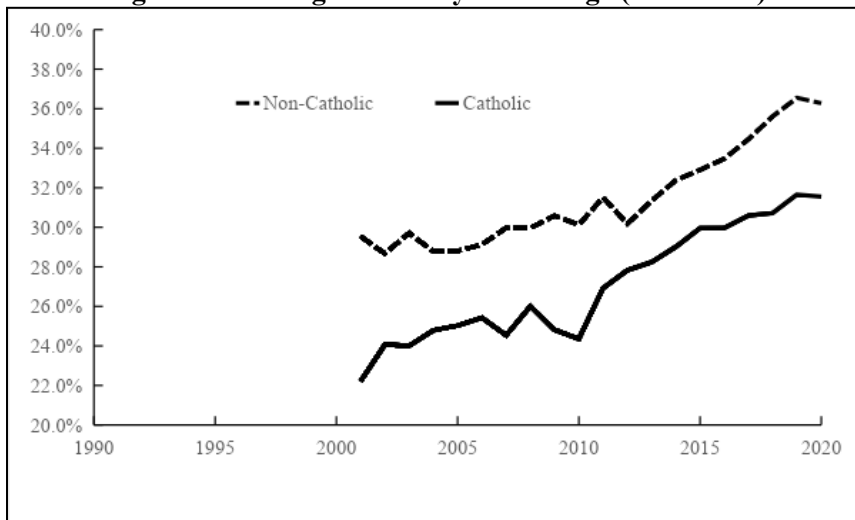
15-23, which cover Doctoral Universities (classifications 15-17), Master’s Colleges and Universities (18-20), and Baccalaureate Colleges (21-23). This enables a comparison of Catholic higher education with higher education overall as almost all of Catholic higher education is within the 15-23 classifications.

Overview: All Schools Compared to Catholic Schools

In our previous essay, we tracked contingent faculty percentages from 2001-2017. For this essay, we added years 2018-2020, taking us through the fall of 2020 and including the initial impact of the pandemic. Our dataset includes 183 Catholic and 1,511 non-Catholic schools. We calculate the contingent faculty percentage by dividing all faculty with rank not on the tenure track divided by all faculty with rank.

Figure 1 shows a trend of increased use of contingent faculty through 2019, followed by a drop in 2020. This trend is seen in both non-Catholic and Catholic institutions. Contingent faculty percentages at non-Catholic colleges and universities increased from 34.5% in 2017 to 35.6% in 2018 to 36.5% in 2019 but then dropped by 0.2% in 2020. For Catholic colleges and universities, contingent faculty percentages increased from 30.6% in 2017 to 30.7% in 2018 to 31.7% in 2019, before dropping by 0.1% in 2020.

Figure 1. Contingent Faculty Percentage (2000-2020)



This overall picture becomes a little more complicated when one breaks down the schools by Carnegie classifications. For non-Catholic colleges and universities, the percentage of contingent faculty rose in 2018 and 2019 before falling slightly in 2020. This trend was consistent between Doctoral Universities and Master’s Colleges and Universities (Carnegie classifications 15-20) and Baccalaureate Colleges (Carnegie

classifications 21-23) (Figure 2a). For Catholic colleges and universities, schools with Carnegie classifications 15-20 consistently increased their percentage of contingent faculty from 2017 through 2020, with only a 0.1% drop in 2020. However, for Catholic schools with classifications 21-23, the contingent faculty percentage fell substantially, from 33.1% to 29.5% (Figure 2b). In other words, the decrease in contingent faculty for Catholic higher education was predominantly in the smaller, baccalaureate-granting institutions.

Figure 2a: Contingent Faculty Percentage at Non-Catholic Institutions, Carnegie Classifications 15-20 vs. 21-23 (2000-2020)

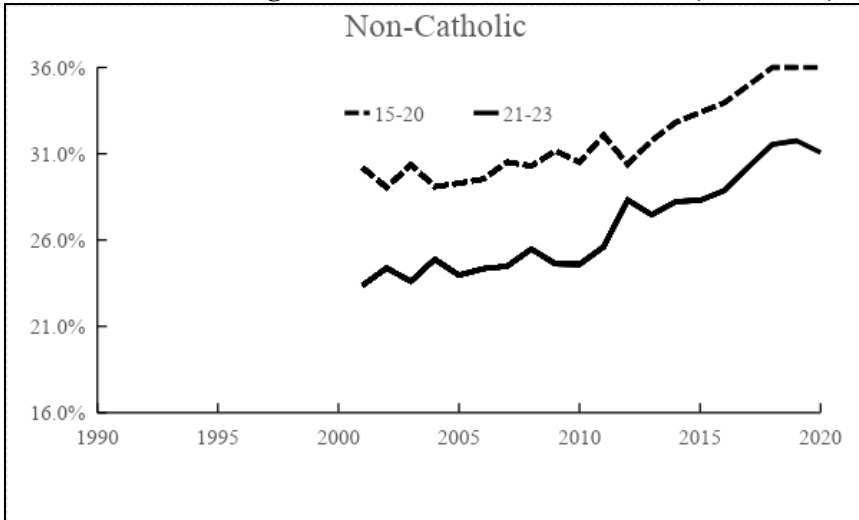
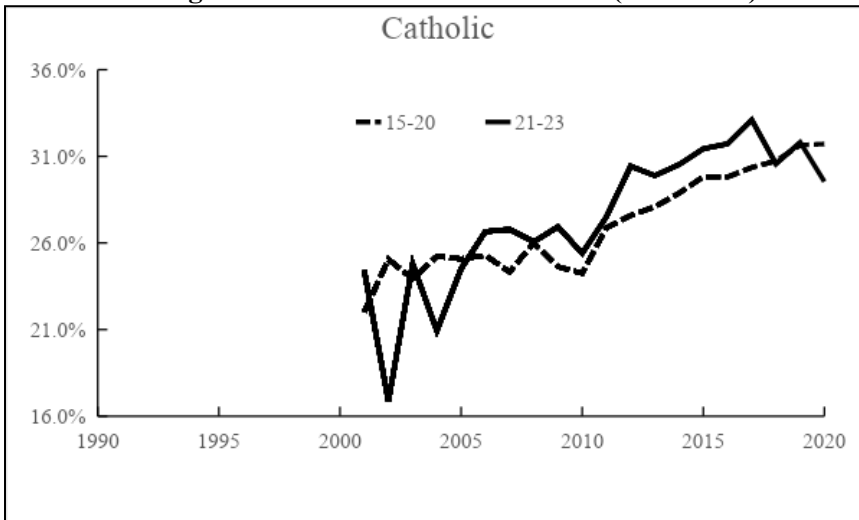


Figure 2b: Contingent Faculty Percentage at Catholic Institutions, Carnegie Classifications 15-20 vs. 21-23 (2000-2020)



In past years, a decline of contingent faculty would seem to be a positive development, implying greater use of tenure and tenure-track faculty. This is not the case for 2020. There was an overall decrease in faculty numbers in every category of school (Table 1). For non-Catholic schools in classification 15-20 (Doctoral Universities and Master’s Colleges and Universities), all faculty numbers decreased by 1.0% and contingent faculty by 1.7%. For Catholic schools in classification 15-20, there were similar decreases with all faculty declining by 2.1% and contingent faculty by 1.9%. The largest decreases came from schools in the 21-23 classification (Baccalaureate Colleges). Non-Catholic schools in this classification saw a decline in all faculty of 3.0% and contingent faculty of 5.1%. The Catholic Baccalaureate Colleges (classification 21-23) saw large decreases in all faculty of 3.9% and contingent faculty of 10.7%. Thus, faculty were decreasing across the board in 2020, but the cuts in contingent faculty were deeper, resulting in the declining percentage of contingent faculty.

Table 1: Annual Percentage Change in Faculty (All Faculty vs. Contingent Faculty)

	2012-2017		2020	
Non-Catholic	All Faculty	Contingent	All Faculty	Contingent
All	2.1%	4.8%	-1.2%	-2.0%
15-20	2.0%	4.9%	-1.0%	-1.7%
21-23	3.3%	4.8%	-3.0%	-5.1%
	2012-2017		2020	
Catholic	All Faculty	Contingent	All Faculty	Contingent
All	0.3%	2.2%	-2.2%	-2.6%
15-20	0.3%	2.3%	-2.1%	-1.9%
21-23	0.4%	2.2%	-3.9%	-10.7%

Gender and Catholic Schools

Gender played a role in the decrease in contingent faculty at Catholic schools (Table 2). The percentage of men who were contingent faculty, as opposed to tenured or tenure-track faculty, generally increased from 2017 to 2019 and then dropped in 2020. This was true overall and when broken down by Carnegie classifications. The contingent faculty percentage for men fell from 26.2% to 25.7% for all Catholic schools, 26.0% to 25.7% for Doctoral- and Master’s-granting Catholic schools, and 28.8% to 26.6% for Baccalaureate-granting Catholic schools.

The picture for women was surprisingly different. Overall, the percentage of women who were contingent faculty, as opposed to tenured or tenure-track faculty, increased by 0.2% (Table 3). This increase was only at Catholic schools with Carnegie classifications of 15-20 (Doctoral Universities and Master’s Colleges and Universities). There, the percentage of women who were contingent faculty rose by 0.4%. At Catholic schools with Carnegie classifications of 21-23 (Baccalaureate

Colleges), the percentage of women who were contingent faculty decreased by 2.4%. While severe, it is close to the 2.2% decrease of men in these classifications. Thus, at Catholic schools, it seems that cuts in female contingent faculty were smaller than for male contingent faculty. In comparison, non-Catholic schools had decreases in the percentage of men and women contingent faculty, but the gender disparity was smaller than at Catholic schools.

Table 2: Contingent Faculty Percentage at Catholic Institutions, by Gender and Carnegie Classifications

Year	All		Carnegie 15-20		Carnegie 21-23	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
2017	25.0%	36.2%	24.6%	36.2%	30.1%	36.2%
2018	25.3%	36.2%	25.1%	36.3%	27.2%	34.3%
2019	26.2%	37.0%	26.0%	37.2%	28.8%	35.0%
2020	25.7%	37.2%	25.7%	37.5%	26.6%	32.7%

Table 3: Contingent Faculty Analysis, 2019-2020

All Classifications	Catholic			Non-Catholic		
	2019	2020	Diff	2019	2020	Diff
All	31.7%	31.6%	-0.1%	36.5%	36.3%	-0.3%
Men	26.2%	25.7%	-0.5%	30.9%	30.5%	-0.3%
Women	37.0%	37.2%	0.2%	43.4%	43.0%	-0.3%
Classifications 15-20						
All	31.6%	31.7%	0.1%	37.1%	36.8%	-0.2%
Men	26.0%	25.7%	-0.4%	31.0%	30.7%	-0.3%
Women	37.2%	37.5%	0.4%	44.5%	44.2%	-0.3%
Classifications 21-23						
All	31.8%	29.5%	-2.3%	31.8%	31.1%	-0.7%
Men	28.8%	26.6%	-2.2%	29.8%	29.1%	-0.7%
Women	35.0%	32.7%	-2.4%	33.9%	33.1%	-0.8%

The decreases do not reveal the true depth of cuts to contingent faculty. These percentages speak to the percentage of the overall faculty that are contingent, a ratio where contingent faculty is the numerator and overall faculty the denominator. The problem is that there were substantial faculty cutbacks between 2019 and 2020 (Table 4). All faculty were being reduced. This was true for Catholic and non-Catholic schools, both Carnegie classifications of 15-20 and 21-23, and for men and women. In other words, Table 3 shows the makeup of faculty consisting of less contingent faculty, but Table 4 shows that this was not because of increases in tenure and tenure-track faculty but because contingent faculty were cut deeper than faculty overall. So, when looking at the absolute

numbers (Table 4), the starkness of the cuts in contingent faculty becomes clear. It was most shocking at small Catholic schools (Baccalaureate Colleges, classifications 21-23). The decline in contingent faculty at these institutions was over 10%.

One trend stands out: the percentage decrease in contingent faculty was larger than the corresponding percentage decrease in all faculty in every single category but three: women in all Catholic schools, all contingent faculty at Catholic schools with classifications of 15-20 (Doctoral Universities and Master’s Colleges and Universities), and women at Catholic schools with classifications of 15-20 (Doctoral Universities and Master’s Colleges and Universities). Two of these three categories address women and contingent faculty and point to an unexpected result. For Catholic schools, male faculty declined more severely than female faculty.

Table 4: Percentage Change in Faculty Numbers, 2019-2020

	Catholic		Non-Catholic	
	All Faculty	Contingent	All Faculty	Contingent
All Classifications				
All	-2.2%	-2.6%	-1.2%	-2.0%
Men	-3.3%	-5.2%	-2.1%	-3.2%
Women	-1.1%	-0.7%	-0.2%	-0.9%
Classifications 15-20				
All	-2.1%	-1.9%	-1.0%	-1.7%
Men	-3.2%	-4.5%	-1.9%	-2.9%
Women	-1.0%	-0.1%	0.0%	-0.6%
Classifications 21-23				
All	-3.9%	-10.7%	-3.0%	-5.1%
Men	-4.9%	-12.2%	-3.8%	-5.9%
Women	-2.8%	-9.3%	-2.2%	-4.4%

Administration, Staff, and Catholic Schools

It is worth noting that the pandemic not only hit faculty but also administration and staff. Catholic colleges and universities saw a decrease in the percentage of Non-Instruction or Research Employees from 67.1% in 2019 to 66.5% in 2020 (Table 5). Prior to 2020, this percentage had varied narrowly in the range between 67.1% and 67.4%. This decrease is about twice the decrease for faculty (Table 6). Just as with faculty, the most significant decreases came from Catholic schools with Carnegie classifications of 21-23 (Baccalaureate Colleges).

Table 5: Catholic Colleges and Universities: Percentage of

Non-Instruction or Research Employees

Year	% Non-Instruction or Research
2012	67.3%
2013	67.1%
2014	67.4%
2015	67.2%
2016	67.1%
2017	67.3%
2018	67.1%
2019	67.1%
2020	66.5%

Table 6: Percentage Change in Number of Employees, 2019-2020

	Total	Non-Instruction or Research	Instruction
All Catholic	-3.6%	-4.3%	-2.3%
15-20	-3.4%	-4.1%	-2.1%
21-23	-5.4%	-6.2%	-3.7%

Discussion

The effects of the pandemic were particularly bleak for Catholic higher education. We make three significant observations. First, Catholic schools responded to the pandemic with a substantial decrease in employment in the fall of 2020. Administration and staff decreased by 4.3%, all faculty decreased by 2.2%, and contingent faculty decreased by 2.6%. This resulted in an overall decrease in employment of 3.6%. This first effect is the easiest to explain. Hit by unexpected financial exigencies, schools cut employees to save money. Staff and administration seemed easier to cut than faculty. With fewer students on campus in the fall of 2020, schools likely found it easier to cut student life officials, for example, than faculty—contingent or not—as classes still had to be taught.

Second, the greatest employment reductions were at smaller Catholic schools, those with Carnegie classifications of 21-23 (Baccalaureate Colleges). In these schools, the overall decrease of employment was 5.4% and of all faculty was 3.9%. Here, though, is where contingent faculty were hit the hardest. More than 10% of contingent faculty were cut at these schools. This is the most significant decrease in all schools, Catholic or non-Catholic. Our explanation of this second effect is a little more speculative. While some Catholic institutions have large endowments, like Notre Dame at \$11 billion and Boston College at \$2.5 billion, most have more modest endowments. According to the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, the median endowment for Catholic schools is \$33.6 million, about half of the \$65 million that is the median of all U.S. colleges and universities (Association of Catholic

Colleges and Universities). This creates a precarious financial situation at most Catholic schools. From 2016-2019, 39 colleges closed, and 20% were Catholic (*Inside Higher Ed*). When the pandemic hit, the financial fallout must have impacted these schools significantly, and, as a result, they reacted with substantial cuts in contingent faculty.

Finally, the pandemic seems to have affected men more than women at Catholic schools. This result is unexpected and the most difficult to explain. It contrasts with other research on the effects of the pandemic on women. There were no statements from Catholic colleges and universities saying they were working toward gender parity in employment, so it is doubtful that the result comes from schools' commitment to Catholic social teaching. Thus, without further research and analysis, we can only speculate about this surprising finding. It could be that gender inequity had to do with more men retiring and leaving the field. As the *Chronicle of Higher Education* reported, 35% of faculty considered changing jobs and 38% of faculty considered retirement. Given that men tend to hold higher-paying positions in the academy, perhaps they were in a better position to depart or retire when the pandemic hit. Thus, they would be more likely to leave their jobs. If women were not in this position, they would need to keep working and maybe even pick up available sections because of departures and retirement. Or, perhaps, the demands of caring for children or elderly parents during the pandemic meant that women needed their employment more. They would not have fought back against onerous demands of the institutions, whereas men with fewer of these demands and more financial security might not have stood for them. Or, perhaps, it was even simpler: women earned less than men, so it was better to fire men. It is also possible that given the dynamics of childcare and elderly care, women pursued more parttime work than men. None of these are quite satisfactory because they do not explain why women overall lost positions, so clearly more work is needed here.

While difficult staffing decisions are understandable given the dynamics of the U. S. response to the pandemic, they still suggest that the financial decisions of Catholic colleges and universities often end up in tension with their commitments to the dignity of work and workers. It was a trend already operative in faculty hiring practices over the past several decades that has favored contingent, flexible instructors. However, the pandemic seems to have strengthened a justification for hiring contingent faculty—they can be easily released. Even if the 2020 data turn out to be a single data point and Catholic schools return to their previous employment trends, the tensions between their labor practices and labor commitments in Catholic higher education need addressing in order to align mission, principles, and values with practice.

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