

One Way to Advocate Equity for Women Staff on Campus

By Julia Lehman Caldwell, training coordinator for learning and technology services, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire

Ed. Note: At many schools women end up in low paying “limited term employment” jobs with few benefits. Here is an example from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, one of 13 campuses in the state university system.

“Across Wisconsin, I see talented and tenacious women poised to lead this state’s economic growth—if only we clear obstacles from their path.”

—Lt. Governor Barbara Lawton

When Carol Accola became the manager of a University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire campus help desk and software training group, she quickly realized that her staff was mostly women who had worked five to ten years in the job classification “limited term employees” or LTEs. These state employees earn low wages (a minimum of 20% less than permanent workers doing the same jobs) with no vacation, sick time, personal or legal holidays, and sometimes no health insurance.



Julia Lehman Caldwell

I experienced these inequitable conditions firsthand. In 2003, with four years of professional work experience and a master’s degree in progress, I became the coordinator for Accola’s software training program—an LTE position that had existed since 1995 and remained “limited term” for 12 years, until 2007.

Almost three years into my employment, my mom suffered a massive stroke. As an LTE, I had no vacation, sick leave, personal or legal holidays. Fortunately my co-workers showed their support by taking up a collection, which helped pay my bills while I took unpaid time off to be with my mom during her four-month hospital stay.

While studying the attributes of successful companies in her MBA coursework, Accola became concerned about people she supervised working long term in these inequitable LTE positions. “Successful companies took care of their people, and then the people in turn worked hard,” she learned.

Despite Accola’s concern, UW-Eau Claire maintains LTE positions for many years. Of the 144 LTEs at Eau Claire, 72% are women. “I know people who worked here in various offices as LTEs for more than 20 years,” said Accola, now the associate director of learning and technology services there. “I do think this is a significant problem at UW-Eau Claire and I believe it may even be worse in the UW System.”

While a common response among managers and administration is to accept that “this is the system we’re stuck with,” or “people have choices,” Accola challenged the status quo for her LTEs.

Defining ‘limited term employee’

According to a University of Wisconsin press release, an LTE appointment is used to carry out short term or seasonal work. An LTE position is limited to no more than 1,043 hours, or six months, of full-time work per year. But a person may hold *one* or *two* LTE positions, resulting in ongoing

part-time or full-time work.

UW-Eau Claire currently has 144 limited term employees, according to HR assistant Jan Sikora. She said that about half the LTEs have two positions, meaning the number of LTE positions is likely around 200. This constitutes about 27% of all university staff (classified staff and LTEs), or 13% of all university employees. Women are 72% of current LTEs at Eau Claire.

Many in “limited term” positions have worked long term without receiving the benefits like permanent state employees get. A May 2009 survey of UW-Eau Claire’s LTEs revealed their average “limited term” employment was 11.6 years.

How Long Have You Been an LTE at UW-Eau Claire?

Less than a year	24%
1–2 years	22
3–4 years	14
5–6 years	11
More than 6 years	29%

Survey respondents were in a variety of positions, such as custodial, clerical, police, early childhood education, marketing, communications, event planning, and technology support. Of them, 84% were female, 26% were the sole providers for their families. Almost half (49%) reported having a four-year college degree, while 10% had a master’s degree, 13% had a two-year degree and 21% had some college.

Limited benefits

LTEs receive no paid vacation, sick leave or personal or legal holidays, retirement health credits, seniority, job security or professional development.

After they have worked at least 600 hours in a 12-month period, the university contributes 8.5% of their salary into their Wisconsin Retirement System account and they are eligible for health insurance coverage, for which they pay half of the cost.

According to the LTE Handbook, LTEs start at 20% less than the minimum rate for the Civil Service position classification, with wage increases up to the minimum rate for that Civil Service position classification. This is the most an LTE can ever earn, while a permanent employee can earn up to the maximum rate plus receive wage increases as negotiated by union contracts.

To become a permanent state employee, I had to interview and compete with others, including permanent state employees, for the position I had worked in for three years. My wages increased \$5.51 per hour—more than \$200 more per week—for doing the same work, which came along with annual wage increases as negotiated by union contracts, vacation, sick leave, personal and legal holidays.

But in some ways my LTE service didn’t count. An employee’s seniority date is the original date of employment as a *permanent* employee. Although I’ve worked for the university for five years (three as an LTE and two years as a permanent employee), I earn vacation benefits at the rate of a two-year employee—a difference that costs me 32 hours of vacation time per year.

Treatment of LTEs varies widely. Although 37% of survey respondents reported receiving annual performance evaluations from their managers, 41% did not. While 21% said they

received annual wage increases, 45% did not. In my three years as an LTE, I was given annual performance reviews and received two 50-cent per hour raises.

Do LTEs have any rights? Jan Sikora says it depends on what you mean by *rights*. "In terms of progression and transfer, LTEs have no rights. When an LTE starts they sign documents saying they don't have the rights or benefits that regular, permanent employees have," Sikora said. But she cited a sexual harassment situation as an example of LTEs having the same rights as any employee.

No equal pay for equal work

In this difficult time of budget cuts, workloads increase with no reward for limited term employees. One respondent wrote, "My boss has continued to give me more on my plate, and I have kept up with his demands. All the while staying at the same pay for six years." Another wrote, "I've worked as an LTE for nine years now. What does LTE stand for? Limited Term Employee. They are taking advantage of LTEs by not giving them vacation, sick days, paid holidays and personal days."

One LTE wrote, "I think it's hard for a university to state it's concerned about equity when it essentially creates second-class citizens within its own workforce...being an LTE can make you feel worthless; no matter what you do, or how well you do your job, there are no promotions or rewards...Your heart breaks when you resent your child for being sick, because it's another day without pay."

My colleagues and I worked many years as LTEs before we were able to apply and compete for our own permanent positions. If not for our manager, Carol Accola, who crusaded to get equal rights for her LTEs, I'm confident that we would all still be "limited term."

In 1976, Accola took a job at UW-Eau Claire doing data entry in admissions. Less than four years later, she was promoted to the registrar's office. While working full-time, Carol earned a bachelor's degree in management information systems and an MBA. Today she is the associate director of learning and technology services at UW-Eau Claire.

Converting LTEs to permanent employees

Challenging the system by converting LTEs to full-time permanent positions is not impossible, but it takes persistence and passion. Accola's unit has converted all of its long-term limited term employees to permanent state employees, using retirements and position vacancies that long-term LTEs could compete for.

LTS director Craig Mey supported her plan. "Craig knows you have to treat people well, build up a staff that cares, to get good performance," said Accola, who also gathered support from other LTS managers. "I just said we would make do with less people, or cut services. I had to convince the other managers that our group would take on more if we could have the FTE."

HR assistant Jan Sikora said this model used by LTS could be different for other position classifications. For example, for a University Services Associate position to be converted to a permanent position, it would first have to be posted for any permanent employee in the UW System to transfer into. If no one transfers into the position, the inter-

view process begins with candidates based on their Civil Service exam scores.

Dr. David Shih, UW-Eau Claire fellow in equity, diversity, and inclusiveness, hopes to improve LTE equity at the campus level. "This is a flawed system that we have routinely supported," he said. "The system has created, in some cases, second class citizens within their own departments."

He said that we have just begun the conversation about LTE equity issues; staff equity relates to student success, for which we are all responsible. "With the way we do business now, diversity, equity and inclusiveness should be engaged in the service of student success at every level... everyone is responsible for student success."

Patti See, chair of the Commission on the Status of Women, said, "The Commission has historically been concerned with issues of fairness and giving a voice to those who don't have one. I'm afraid that Limited Term Employees have no Norma Rae to rally them."

In 2006, after scrutiny of its long term use of about 2,500 limited term employees, the UW-Madison flagship campus executed an LTE reform plan. It was to: use LTE employment only for seasonal or irregular functions, set wages for LTE appointments at or above the living wage, and begin a five-year plan to convert existing LTE positions that are not seasonal or irregular to permanent status.

According to Mark Walters, director of classified human resources at UW-Madison, they now are down to 1,600 LTE appointments, 288 of which are identified for conversion to permanent status while the rest are seasonal or irregular positions. Since the LTE reform plan started in October 2006, 50 LTE positions have been converted to permanent status, creating the equivalent of 36.4 new FTE positions. In addition, 89% of LTEs now earn the living wage of \$10.92 per hour or more.

A stepping stone?

For the lucky ones, working as an LTE can be a stepping stone to permanent state employment, which guarantees higher wages, better benefits and union representation. HR assistant Sikora was once an LTE, as were HR director Donna Weber and many others on campus. But it's not easy.

Carol Accola is the advocacy model needed to promote "limited term employees" into permanent positions throughout the UW system. Gaining equal rights for Wisconsin women working in "limited term" positions in higher education is critical to women's economic success in Wisconsin. We can be the ultimate model for helping students to "develop and use skills for promoting equity, diversity, and inclusivity in civic and professional contexts."

Accola—who made so many changes for her limited term employees—now serves on the chancellor's diversity committee. She contends that we can all inspire positive change. "I looked at my circle of influence and said 'What can I do?'" she said.

"When I became a manager, I could do something. That's what we have to do with diversity. Look at ourselves as one person making a difference." ■

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