



Chapter 1. Introduction

This book outlines what fair and effective practices for contingent faculty can look like. Drawing from more than 20 years of union activism and university teaching, I examine programs, policies, and practices that work for non-tenure-track (NTT) faculty. This detailed analysis of facts on the ground will be one of the first of its kind, and I hope that it will help contingent faculty members fight for better working conditions. Throughout this book, I focus on issues concerning academic freedom, job security, compensation, shared governance, promotion, evaluation, benefits, and dispute resolution for NTT faculty.

The intended audience for this work is not only NTT faculty members and union and non-union organizers, but I also hope to interest people concerned about higher education in general and about the broader labor market. Since so many jobs now are low wage and part time, it is vital to see how working conditions can be improved for all precarious laborers.

Although much of this book was written before the COVID-19 pandemic, the basic arguments and analysis are still relevant and valid. What the current crisis has changed is the intensification of certain trends rendering precarious faculty even more precarious (Tam and Jacoby n.p.). Not only are more contingent faculty seeing their job security and compensation reduced, but universities and colleges have also eliminated many tenure-track (TT) jobs (Shillington et al. 501). Moreover, the move to remote learning has increased the potential for administrative power as it has enhanced the possibility of surveillance of the faculty (Day et al. 4). Due to the need for social distancing and the reduction of in-person education, the organizing of precarious faculty members has also been harmed (Fay and Ghadimi 815). However, what has not changed is the need to improve the working conditions of contingent instructors in higher education. The model presented in this book is not only more fair and more just than many of the existing higher education employment structures, but it is also achievable through sustained collective organizing.

● A Short History of Contingent Faculty

Much of my knowledge on this topic comes from my experience being a lecturer at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB) and the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and my 13 years as union president representing contingent faculty in the University of California (UC) system. Although many of my examples will come from the UC system, following the lead of Heidi McGrew and Joe Untener, I draw on my local experience to define good practices that can be used in different types of institutions. One of my concerns motivating this work is that when we concentrate on bad practices, we can become depressed and de-mobilized, so it is essential to look at what has been done and

what can be done in the future to improve the working conditions of contingent faculty members.

Throughout this book, I define precarious faculty members as people who are not eligible for tenure. At times, I use the term contingent, while at other times, I use the term precarious. While many graduate student instructors also fall into the category of precarious, I focus mainly on part-time and full-time non-tenure-track instructors who are not graduate students. The reason for this definition of contingency is that I believe, like Adrianna Kezar and Cecile Sam, that a major distinction must be made between those who do and do not have the possibility of gaining the job security that goes along with tenure (“Governance as a Catalyst” n.p.).

Much of this book is concerned with the ways contingent faculty are perceived by other people within higher education institutions and how these faculty members perceive themselves. I seek to explain the causes for the situation in which contingent faculty, who make up the majority of faculty members, do not share the same basic rights and treatment as their more privileged TT colleagues (White n.p.). As I argued in *Educating Inequality*, higher education not only tends to enhance economic inequality but also socializes students to see inequality as inevitable (Samuels 4-6). What is interesting is that not only does college on average increase social and economic inequality for students, but also it tends to do the same thing to the faculty by producing and rationalizing an academic hierarchy.

● The Cause of Contingency

Many people have argued about the causes for this hierarchy in higher education (Pratt 264; Thompson, “Alchemy in the Academy” 278; Brill; Gulli 1), and while this book focuses more on the solutions to the problem, I do want to begin by offering an explanation for the creation and maintenance of academic precarity. The most convincing narrative I have encountered is derived from Robert Nisbet’s book *The Degradation of the Academic Dogma*. Nisbet argues that after World War II, governmental funding for scientific research and Cold War defense made its way to American research universities. This new source of revenue radically restructured these institutions as many science faculty realized that they could make more money and receive more prestige if they focused on externally funded research. One problem that arose was who would teach the undergraduate students. At first, universities turned to graduate students, but eventually they started to hire a growing number of NTT teaching-centered faculty.

This situation created an academic social hierarchy that still structures higher education today with research valued over teaching, the sciences privileged over the humanities, graduate education prioritized over undergraduate instruction, theory promoted over practice, faculty emphasized over students, and prestige favored over the public mission (Samuels, *Educating Inequality* 121). Within research universities, these structural hierarchies also rationalize

an economic and political hierarchy so that researchers are compensated at a higher rate than teachers. In the case of introductory courses, such as those in composition, languages, and math, the main focus on teaching undergraduate students how to improve a particular skill places these instructors on the lower end of all of the class hierarchies. In other words, in order to justify paying certain faculty less money, a set of institutional hierarchies and prejudices have to be activated and maintained.

● Generating Prestige

One of the key lessons we can gather from Nisbet's historical narrative is the idea that the exploitation of contingent academic labor is not primarily the result of evil administrators or budget-cutting state politicians; rather, professors responding to incentives were driven to outsource the non-lucrative and non-prestige-generating aspects of their jobs. Moreover, this internal dynamic fed into a central tenant of Marx's economic theory, which is that the more valuable a job is for society, the less it will be compensated because people do not want to pay for necessary things like childcare, cleaning, and other tasks that have been traditionally labeled as female labor (Lebowitz 16-36).

It is vital to stress that labor hierarchies are shaped by cultural prejudices, and these forms of discrimination serve to justify and naturalize the exploitation of workers. The inverse of this system of extracting surplus value from debased members of the social hierarchy is the generation of a prestige economy based on the scarcity of a valued object (Blackmore and Kandiko 403-411). For instance, I was once at a meeting at UCLA where the criteria for tenure and whether two books should be the new benchmark was being discussed. A senior professor got up and said, "When you open a rare book, it loses half of its value. Our faculty should write books that no one ever opens." This story points to the underlying irrational logic of the prestige economy (Daly 67). Value is often defined by its non-use value, while something that is very useful has to be devalued (Eaton and Eswaran 1088-104).

● Cynical Conformity

To comprehend how contingent faculty are affected by these academic structures, we have to see the ways the dominant form of subjectivity in higher education is cynical conformity (Sloterdijk n.p.). For example, schools will say that rankings of them do not measure anything of real value, but the same schools try to compete to raise their status. In this case, cynical conformity means that people aim to succeed in a system in which they do not believe. This same logic applies to the use of student evaluations to assess the quality of teaching. Most institutions now know that these tools are not scientific and that they are highly biased, but they are still being used (Merritt 235-38). Cynical conformity also helps to explain the use of large lecture classes, grades, and biased admissions

standards. In other words, virtually everything going on in higher education is mediated by the attitude of conformity from a distance (Žižek and Laclau 104).

If we use Peter Sloterdijk's theory of cynical conformity to think about the treatment of contingent faculty, we realize that even though many people know that the system of relying on contingent faculty is ethically wrong, it is still used because people are simply conforming to a structure in which they do not believe. The question then is how do we change this culture and counter cynical conformity? My experience is that a central tool for promoting positive social change is giving people something in which they believe. For contingent faculty, this may mean starting first with the attitude that their work is essential and should not be the target of prejudice and discrimination. It also means moving second to the idea that these teachers need to join together to fight for better working conditions, which can be done by forming a union or another type of collective organization.

As illustrated by Georgette Fleischer's "Come Together, Right Now/Over Me, Over You, Over Us," many people within the contingent faculty movement believe the best way to fight for better working conditions is to shame administrators and professors by revealing the unjust nature of the exploitation of precarious teachers. My experience has been that this appeal to justice rarely works and what is needed is collective power in order to counter institutional power. Since contingent teachers now make up the majority of the faculty, they should be able to organize themselves to demand better treatment, but this requires forming group solidarity fueled by a vision of a better future (Kezar, "Needed Policies" 2).

What I hope to present in this work is a view of the ways different groups have been able to improve the working lives of contingent faculty in the United States. By providing concrete examples of specific practices and policies, I present models that all contingent faculty can seek to attain. Although I do not think that one model fits all situations, it is important to look at actual ways contingent faculty have improved their working conditions (Doe and Palmquist 23). Part of this work requires understanding the diversity of precarious academic positions while outlining the way change can happen at higher education institutions. In using the example of other minority rights social movements, I examine the relation between campaigns for social justice and the desire to attain fair and equitable treatment both inside and outside of the academy.

● Book Outline

Chapter 2 describes the content and effects of the union contract representing over 6,500 contingent faculty in the UC system. One of my main goals in this section is to present best practices that can be developed both inside and outside of a unionized institution. Not only do I provide information on effective review and promotion policies for NTT faculty, but also I discuss how to integrate teaching, research, and service into the assessable workload for instructors who

are not eligible for tenure. A key idea presented in this chapter is the need to base contracts and working conditions on shared principles.

In Chapter 3, I examine different ways contingent faculty can organize to improve their working conditions. I discuss here the structure and logic of progressive social movements and specific methods precarious contingent workers have used to make their workplaces more democratic. My overall goal is to provide examples of what is possible if precarious faculty work together to improve their jobs.

The fourth chapter analyses the ways the actual practices I describe go against many of the myths and prejudices concerning precarious faculty. In looking closely at Herb Childress' book *The Adjunct Underclass*, I reveal how even a sympathetic portrayal of contingent faculty can recirculate destructive stereotypes and blind us from seeing more progressive possibilities. While I do not want to minimize the negative working conditions facing most precarious academic labor, I feel it is important to balance the representation of negative aspects with positive possibilities. After all, why should people fight for improvements if they do not think it is possible to make progressive changes?

Chapter 5 examines Michael Bérubé and Jennifer Ruth's exploration, in *The Humanities, Higher Education, and Academic Freedom*, of providing tenure to contingent faculty members. Although these well-intentioned professors seek to help the cause of NTT faculty, their work actually exposes many of the destructive prejudices that tenured allies often hold in relation to contingent faculty members. To counter some of these prejudices and to offer a different vision of the future, I argue that full-time, non-tenure-track (FTNTT) positions offer an alternative to the binary opposition between tenure and pure contingency.

Chapter 6 concludes the book by focusing on the role of contingent faculty in the new "gig academy" as defined by Adrianna Kezar and colleagues in their book *The Gig Academy*. In looking at the changing nature of work in higher education and in the general economy, I offer ways of rethinking workplace democracy. One of my central arguments is that those of us with experience in improving the working conditions of contingent faculty in higher education can use that experience to improve the lives of millions of workers in the general economy who are now being misclassified as contract laborers.