

Wouldn't a New Progressive Era Require Faculty Equity?

by Steve Street

As anyone who's ever defended a thesis or been on a tenure track must know, American institutions of higher education have rigorous and finely calibrated ways of according respect to those who work in them. What we don't have enough of is respect from those beyond our gates. Indications of this lack range from the common employer's complaint that new college-grad hires can't write a memo to Naomi Schaefer Riley's offhand remark in an April *Wall Street Journal* column: "Higher education has gone so far off the rails in recent years that parents and students hardly know what they're supposed to have learned in a freshman composition course or Sociology 101."¹

Actually, in my freshman composition classes, students are supposed to learn critical-reading skills, which would equip them to point out that the real evidence of higher education's failings is not so much Ms. Riley's sweeping generalization as the fact that neither she nor her editors at this newspaper of impeccable journalistic standards felt a need to provide support for her contention.

But even from my vantage point as a faculty member accorded the least amount of official respect an institution of higher education can confer after two decades in the profession (I've still got the same job title I started out with, for even less money), it's clear that we have the wherewithal to raise the level of respect we get outside our gates. We can do it by redistributing more equitably the responsibilities, resources, and respect given those of us inside.

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In much the same way that in order to restore public confidence in a corrupt police force, payoff networks must be dismantled before hiring new cops on the beat or buying new cruisers, the system that created the two-tiered faculty—tenure-line and contingent—on our nation’s campuses must go. But our corruption doesn’t lie with either tier of the faculty, but with administrations that find contingency useful in terms of economics and flexibility. So no purge of faculty ranks need occur. If contingents are hurting the quality of education because of inferior credentials, hasty hiring practices, or inadequate compensation and other working conditions, the solution is to address those practices and conditions and

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to integrate present and future contingents into the workings of colleges and universities: tenure, governance, pay, benefits, service, and holiday parties, too.² Then there will be just a single tier and a single percentage, no part- to full-time faculty ratios but 100 percent of faculty who are treated as faculty and who perform as faculty. And that integrated and beefed-up faculty will be in a position to regain control of their curricula and institutions.

Once we’ve created this integrated and beefed-up faculty, institutions of higher education will be more transparent. An A will be an A and a B a B (not, “really a D in grad school, right?” as a student suggested last semester). All faculty will be credentialed and remunerated as such. Whether we teach one course a semester or four, at the 100 or the 400 level, we’ll be contributing in proportion to our workloads, not our career tracks, and we’ll contribute together, integrating our efforts. When contingent faculty have the respect accorded to other faculty who teach the same students and when contingent faculty have the office space, job security, and remuneration that will allow them to focus their efforts on their students and their subjects rather than on overcoming their adverse working conditions—then the educational experience, which already has plenty of substantive dichotomies and distinctions for students to make sense of, will seem more seamless, less chaotic and needlessly puzzling, contradictory, or pointless.

Examples of distracting institutional dichotomies born of the two-tiered faculty system abound. Lower-level and general-education courses that students take first, often taught by contingents, have come to constitute a kind of weeding-out process so that the more institutionally integrated faculty can teach with passion and delight in the students’ second or third undergraduate year. Maybe out of departmental concern for contingent quality, the first-year courses are often heav-

ily structured with required syllabi and learning outcomes, which contingent faculty, worried about being rehired, tend to enforce enthusiastically. But I wish I had a nickel for every student I've had in a rigorous second-semester research-methods course who's seen me four years later and said, "You know, I still remember that MLA documentation you taught, but I never had to use it again." One senior, winner of a departmental literary award, who'd overlooked a requirement and had to enroll in one of my gen-ed classes on how to read fiction, either couldn't or wouldn't close-read "Heart of Darkness" for the tone of Marlow's descriptions of the coast of Africa, because she'd already learned all there was to know about

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Conrad in her colonialism class.

My point is that the two-tiered system creates needless gaps: between faculty members ("I never talk to adjuncts," read one blog comment, "... they're always talking about teaching."); between faculty and students; and, as a byproduct, between students and subject matter.

Equity can help close those gaps by rewarding all faculty equivalently, in proportion to a full and fair assessment of their actual contributions rather than according to tracks or other institutional constructs. Distinctions between faculty should be substantive, not institutional: based on expertise and discipline, between who's served two years and who 10 or 20, who's designed this course or that one, who's taught this book or that one or tried this or that approach with it. All who teach should be treated like teachers—and not just by students looking for a grade.

It's well established that contingents make up the majority of faculty in American institutions of higher education. Whether they're part-time, full-time, post-doctoral or graduate students, depending on what kind of institution is relying on them, they grew from 30 percent of American faculty in 1975 to almost 70 percent in 2005, teaching 49 percent of undergraduate courses in public institutions.³ To the extent that the rise is seen to create problems in teaching quality, in institutional commitment (both ways), and in the threat to tenure and the erosion of governance—all of which interrelated and multi-faceted questions should be and have been examined closely and debated at length⁴—its solution is often assumed to be in trying to flip-flop those percentages or "Reversing the Course," as the title of a recent publication on the issue puts it (though that report from the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) does affirm the need for contingent equity). The New York State Higher Education Commission put it more baldly in

its report last year: “Failure to invest in a strong base of full-time faculty poses the single greatest threat to academic quality.”⁵

But that’s an attempt at an easy solution to what’s become a complex problem. To reinvest in the very system that gave rise to the problem seems less than judicious. If the need for flexibility in academic staffing is the justification for using contingent faculty—who, unlike tenured faculty, can be let go as programs and enrollment numbers fluctuate—wouldn’t it make more sense to concede that need in our faster-and-faster changing world and work instead on professionalizing the flexible faculty?

University of Massachusetts Sociologist Dan Clawson points out that “[i]f non-tenure-system faculty were paid reasonably, received benefits, and had job security, administrators would have less incentive to replace tenure-system faculty with (no longer quite so) contingent faculty.”⁶ In fact, the solution to what Modern Language Association leadership called “the biggest challenge facing our ... profession”⁷ and what Bruno Gulli identifies as the linchpin of the corporate university⁸ is in the problem itself. Tenure and teaching professionalism will be saved by extending their requirements and protections to all those who teach.

How the University Works author Marc Bousquet laments the lack of Ph.D.s among those who teach now,⁹ and James Monks, in a statistical analysis of part-time faculty, their credentials, and their career goals, advocates helping adjuncts get the degree as a solution to the ills of contingency.¹⁰ But even Monks’ figures show that almost a fifth of contingents have Ph.D.s already, and that’s just of the part-time faculty he studied who said they’d prefer full-time positions.



There are many others who would prefer equitable remuneration, benefits, and opportunity for professional development and advancement while keeping their part-time status. Gulli makes a similar distinction, between what he calls “voluntary” and “involuntary contingents.”¹¹ And of course some adjuncts, with careers in fields from politics to law and medicine, have no interest in being academics.

These are all valid distinctions, but they’re beside the point of equity. A man in my union’s part-time concerns committee—a union that like many faculty unions reflects the composition of the university itself and so is made up mostly of full-time, tenure-stream faculty, some of whom act as part-time representatives—

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stopped every discussion for years with the exclamation, “But some part-timers don’t WANT to be full-time!” To cite that as an obstacle to equity is to reason in a circle, perpetuating the contested distinctions between the two-tiered professoriate by addressing them only in the vocabulary of the two-tiered system itself.

As Monks concludes, “there is no stereotypical part-time faculty member.”¹² Some want full-time jobs, some don’t. Some are qualified for full-time jobs at their institutions, some aren’t. Some have other careers. Some, no doubt, are the best that can be gotten for the pay that’s offered, variously estimated at around a fourth of tenure-stream faculty’s per-course salary.¹³ But many more are qualified, committed, and living mainly off the nourishment they generate in their classrooms.

Part-time base pay itself fluctuates wildly, as it’s often determined by local economies as well as professional supply-and-demand. For example, part-time faculty are the only State University of New York employees represented by United University Professions whose salaries aren’t set by statewide contract negotiations. They’re determined locally, so that campuses in heavily populated areas can pay less for a course than schools in more remote areas that must pay more to find qualified faculty. Similarly, even on the same campus, a school can often hire writing teachers like me more easily and pay us less than adjuncts in nursing.

Some of that discrepancy is as it should be: despite the well-known agonies of creation, a person generally stands to suffer less from bad advice in writing than in health care. But more’s at stake than potential benefit or detriment to individuals.

As Gulli says, “a labor sickened by the regime of superexploitation cannot produce a healthy society.”¹⁴ Sick and superexploitation are strong terms, but Gulli’s is essentially the same argument that professor of ethics Dan Maguire made at Jesuit

Marquette University and in *Thought & Action* last fall: “as more and more of the university faculty are NTTs [non tenure-track] and, thus, less free for the unfettered pursuit of truth, the community also loses.”¹⁵

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in her acceptance speech for that office cited this nation’s founding “idea that everyone should have the right to live up to his or her God given potentials and ... that same ideal ... must guide America’s purpose in the world today.”¹⁶ Should lesser ideals guide us at home? How many 10- or 20-year veteran non-tenure track faculty—with little or no job security, professional development or peer acknowledgement, not to mention prestige or a liv-

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ing wage—can feel that their teaching jobs have allowed them to live up to their potential? A senior Hoover Institution fellow who taught in the Ivy League before leaving academia behind talks instead about the “many lives... ruined” here.¹⁷

So does Gulli, who cites John Levin’s work on nontraditional students in community colleges to note how students too can be stultified by this system whose structures and priorities can eclipse “the humanitarian question”: “Evidently, economic growth does not guarantee social well-being ... within the world of higher education in the US large groups of people have potentialities disabled [because] learning is understood only in terms of training for the specific aims and interests of capital and its institutions.”¹⁸ The connection between training and contingency is not that contingents are mere trainers, but if academic freedom and tenure are the gold standards by which we assess education that’s good for students and communities, and if contingent faculty lack such guarantees and security, then it’s the students and the communities who suffer along with them.

So what is to be done? We might start with what’s free or already paid for: our own time, inventiveness, and reorganization skills. Within a department, start with a thorough, comprehensive, peer-administered evaluation of current adjuncts, offering in return the possibility of more job security—rights of first refusal for previously taught courses, for example.—and a scale of title boosts: Lecturer I-IV, for example, as SUNY-Cortland has done with modest base-pay hikes at each stage, or along the lines of the Instructor Tenure Projects at Rutgers University and the University of Colorado.¹⁹ Longer-serving lecturers might help with departmental committee work, relieving tenure-stream faculty of some of that burden. In these ways, for little more than the price of some paperwork, faculties can be integrated, increasing the number who contribute to programs in

a substantial way, and increasing their emotional and intellectual investment in and commitment to programs and departments. Even in times of a thickening bottom line, it's hard to factor in such benefits without resorting to the language of the credit-card commercial ("Priceless!").

Guidelines for the conversion to a single faculty tier do exist. See one set of suggestions from the American Association of University Professors.²⁰ The Canadian Association of University Teachers (whose president, Penni Stewart, told the UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education in Paris in July that "Higher education is quickly becoming one of the most casualized professions,

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perhaps second only to retail services"²¹) recommends even more specific and far-reaching changes, from extending "academic freedom ... to all academic staff regardless of the nature of appointment" to "fair remuneration commensurate with their experience, performance, and responsibilities ... pro-rated to the total compensation ... for a full-time position having similar responsibilities and requiring similar qualifications" to "appropriate academic rank" and "full academic peer participation," seniority, resources and equipment, "access to professional development opportunities," participation in governance, and owning intellectual property.²²

And consider the emerging New Faculty Majority: The National Coalition for Adjunct and Contingent Equity, an independent organization dedicated to "achieving ... the greatest possible degree of economic justice and academic freedom for all faculty," according to its mission statement (www.newfacultymajority.org). Since its germination out of the long-standing Coalition for Contingent Academic Labor's 2008 conference, this movement to bring about a new era in higher education is gathering momentum in its "advocacy, education, and litigation" efforts to create "equitable, stable, non-exploitative academic environments that improve the quality of American higher education."

One benefit of an integrated and harmonious faculty in higher education will be to restore the educational decisions to those who are closest to the students, those who are most able to underscore and impart the skills and values that will equip them to contribute to their communities and the world. Key is the lack of fetters, not just in pursuing philosophical or poetic truths. Dan Clawson says of the sciences, too, that "paradigms shift, and student thinking is stimulated, when dissidents take unpopular positions.... Cutting costs by cutting tenure means that

a smaller proportion of faculty have the structural conditions needed to challenge conventional thinking.”²³

The difference between maintaining the status quo and restructuring for faculty equity is the difference between what he calls “two visions of a university”: “... as a business with a ‘product’ whose offerings should be driven by student ‘demand’ [and that relies] on contingent faculty combined with highly paid administrators committed to ‘the bottom line’—or, on the other hand, “as a center of knowledge where students are educated (not just trained)...”²⁴

Educator working conditions are student learning conditions, and equalizing the working conditions of all those who educate should be one of our highest priorities as we work to create a new progressive era in American higher education. As Caryn Musil points out, “The academy figured out how to rethink entire fields when DNA was discovered and mapped, when technology changed everything about our lives and work, and when women’s ... and ethnic studies forever altered the foundation of knowledge. The academy should be able to make this other change too.”²⁵

ENDNOTES

1. Naomi Shaefer Riley, “So You Want to Be a Professor.”
2. As the stock market began its long roll last year, Florida’s South University reversed its policy of inviting all faculty to its year-end holiday party. “While adjunct faculty are an important part of our university,” said the Director of Communications in Kimberly Miller’s PalBeachPost.com news story “Adjuncts Get Scrooged,” “they are not part of our full time faculty.”
3. Both AFT’s “Reversing the Course” and AAUP’s Contingent Faculty Index 2006 cite figures from the U.S. Department of Education, as do Daniel Maguire and others.
4. On the quality issue alone, Dan Jacoby’s and Audrey Jaeger’s studies on the supposed effects of part-time faculty on such variables as graduation and, in community colleges, transfer rates have been widely cited and criticized (and not only by me in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*).
5. qtd, in Lesko. Also see the full final report: www.hecommission.state.ny.us/.
6. Dan Clawson, “Tenure and the Future of the University,” 1148.
7. Catherine Porter, Sid Smith, and Russell Berman are president and first and second vice presidents, respectively, of the Modern Language Association; based on the findings and recommendations in the association’s December 2008 study of “the current composition of the academic workforce” in their own fields, principally English and modern languages, “Education in the Balance,” they beseeched department chairs directly to advocate within their own schools for equity.
8. The phrase is in Bruno Gulli’s title, “Knowledge Production and the Superexploitation of Contingent Academic Labor.”
9. Marc Bousquet, Brainstorm CHE blog 8/3/09.
10. James Monks, “Who are the Part-time Faculty?” 37.
11. Bruno Gulli, “Knowledge Production and the Superexploitation...” 23.
12. Monks, 33.
13. “Reversing the Course,” (i); as JBL Associates point out, this salary differential is based on dividing an average full-time salary by the number of courses taught, even though a typical

tenure-stream faculty's assignment includes more than teaching. For that reason, as well as the wide fluctuation in part-time salaries to be discussed later in this article, salary differential between contingent and tenure-stream faculty are hotly debated. But for at least one non-academic source the unquantifiable nature of non-teaching work resulted in an even larger ratio than one-fourth: *US News & World Report* cites figures estimating that tenured faculty "cost colleges the equivalent of about \$8,000 per three-credit class... Adjuncts ... cost their employers an average of about \$1,800 per course." That's closer to a fifth than a fourth.

14. Gulli, 21.
15. Daniel Maguire, "Seeking the Path to Adjunct Justice at Marquette University," 54.
16. Hillary Clinton, transcript.
17. qtd. in Riley.
18. Galli, 23.
19. Bradley, "Instructor Tenure Proposals."
20. "Recommended Institutional Regulations on Academic Freedom & Tenure." 2006. AAUP. Section 13: "Part-time Faculty Appointments."
21. "CAUT President Highlights Threat Posed by the Casualization of Academic Work at the UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education."
22. "Policy Statement on Fairness for Contract Academic Staff." Canadian Association of University Teachers. 2009.
23. Clawson, 1147.
24. Ibid, 1148.
25. Caryn McTighe Musil, "Red Blood Cells on Reserve."

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