The Old Normal: Casualization and Contingency in Historical Perspective

by Timothy Reese Cain

American higher education is in the midst of a staffing crisis. More than three quarters of faculty members work off the tenure track, often with no job security, low wages, and few prospects for advancement. While the contingent labor force is diversified—including highly qualified but part-time laborers piecing together positions at multiple institutions, working professionals teaching a single class, and full-time instructors on short- and longer-term contracts—many struggle to make a living wage, work without benefits, and lack the means and support that would enable them to fully serve the needs of their students or otherwise pursue a successful scholarly career. Additionally, graduate students are a key source of academic labor, though one that has too often been mistreated and ill supported. And the current academic labor market offers many of them little chance to pursue the careers for which they think they are preparing. This situation is starting to receive the scholarly and public attention that it deserves, but the challenges are daunting with real effects on higher education and its many constituents.

This pattern of academic staffing is routinely decried as the “new normal” in American higher education. The current condition is extreme, but a more accurate representation would be that it is the modern iteration of the old normal. Although the situation has varied over the centuries, contingency and tenuousness

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are the historic conditions of significant portions the faculty. They were only overcome at the mid-20th century. Even then, within 25 years, faculty conditions were already in retreat. The struggles over salaries, working conditions and governance that fostered the expansion of collective bargaining in the 1960s were a bellwether of the end of what some might consider a “golden age” of the faculty. Yet even that golden age was quite tarnished for those whose race, religion, ethnicity, sexuality, or gender kept them from participating as equal partners in the ascendant faculty.

No single volume charts the full and complex history of the faculty and no single essay can offer anything close to one. As such, I offer something more episodic, highlighting contentious issues and pointing to the longstanding challenges facing those teaching in American colleges and universities. This paper is organized chronologically into four main sections—colonial, early national, post-Civil War, and Inter-War periods—followed by a brief comment on the “golden age.” Each points to contestations over faculty roles, rights, and status while arguing that the antecedents to current struggles appear throughout. And, analogous to modern times, even when some on the faculty prospered, many others did not.

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Instructors in the Colonies and New Republic

Higher education in what is now the U.S. dates to 1636 and the founding of Harvard College, a bold act aimed at educating public servants and clergy, while also serving cultural purposes in the new and struggling colony. Harvard likewise struggled at first. In 1639, the institution’s master, Nathaniel Eaton, hired Nathaniel Briscoe as an assistant teacher. Three days into Briscoe’s employ, Eaton turned on him and they exchanged words and fought, with Briscoe eventually retiring to his room. Eaton, ignoring advice of a constable, entered Briscoe’s room, had him held down by two men and beat him with a cudgel for two hours, hitting him some 200 times about the head and shoulders. When Eaton was interrupted and Briscoe, believing he was about to be murdered, fell to his knees and prayed for his soul, Eaton resumed, believing he was being blasphemous. After an investigation, Eaton was dismissed and fled, Harvard closed for a year, and Briscoe left Cambridge for Milford, Connecticut. It was an inauspicious beginning for the American academic profession.  

Things could only improve for instructors at Harvard, but they remained dif-
ficult. Until the creation of the first professorships in the 1720s, the teaching force consisted of the president and one or two young tutors, typically recent graduates who were assigned to shepherd a class or two for its entire four years if they stayed long enough. Very few did.¹ Theirs was, according to Clifton Shipton, “a miserable life” from which most tried to escape.¹ While some have suggested that Shipton’s view was harsh, it’s clear that being a tutor was not lucrative—salaries “offered a young man enough, just enough, to keep him in his job if his love of teaching and learning, and of the College made him want to stay.”² For a brief period beginning in the late 17th century, tutors assumed greater control and institutional influ-

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ence, but that control was fleeting. Tutors soon become subordinated not just to the president and the governing boards, from which they had their expectation of participation removed, but in the mid-18th century, to the professors as well. There became a substantial and intentional differentiation between the so-called permanent faculty (who could still be removed and were likewise excluded from governance roles) and the larger group of tutors who worked under different conditions, including term limits on their employment. These limits, proposed in 1716 and finally instituted in 1734, allowed Harvard to remove tutors without showing cause while simultaneously using the threat of nonrenewal to further control them. As Burton wrote, “The tutorship was purposefully made a second-tier teaching assignment.”⁶

Faculty at other colonial colleges likewise struggled for autonomy and influence; and they likewise started a long professionalization and differentiation process. In the mid-18th century, faculty at the College of William and Mary may have been the best positioned. Founded in 1693 but without a college curriculum for almost three decades, the six professors, who were largely part-time due to the lack of funds, held significant power. That power, though, was consistently under attack by the external governing board, was diminished in the 1750s and 1760s, and destroyed by a 1790 court ruling confirming external control.⁷ The other colleges were chartered with more clearly delimited faculty roles in governance and a heavy reliance on transitory tutors. At the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University), for example, only two of the 11 tutors appointed before 1760 served more than two years. A similar situation remained for several decades.⁸ “Instruction was,” according to Wertenbaker, “badly handicapped in these early years by the constant changing of tutors. These young men were usually recent graduates who were preparing themselves for the ministry and so had
no thought of retaining their positions permanently. Even had they been attracted to the life of the instructor, the £65 or £75 a year paid them by the trustees was so insufficient for their needs that unless they took a vow of celibacy they could not remain.”

The addition of professors at existing and new institutions increased in the years after the Revolutionary War. The number of professors in American higher education was 10 in 1776 but 94 in 1800. Still, tutors outnumbered professors at most institutions. Professors were generally older than tutors and were frequently assigned a subject area, rather than a graduating class or two as remained most often the case with tutors. They also generally stayed in their positions significantly longer. And while this has been treated as an indication of the early professionalization of the faculty, it was only the professionalization of one portion of the faculty. It was likewise the further degradation of the tutors. Tutors remained “a cheap labor device” with little prospect for careers as professors.

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**THE “AGE OF THE COLLEGE”**

Sixty years ago, Richard Hofstadter’s *Academic Freedom in the Age of the College* told of a brief flourishing of American colleges in the early national period, followed by a significant and devastating retreat away from exploration and vitality. Waves of revision have highlighted a much more complex and experimenting system of colleges and schools than that which Hofstadter described, but no such revision to his understanding of the tenuously of the faculty exists. Academic freedom was nonexistent. Faculty could be and were fired for various offenses, including supporting the wrong political candidates, speaking out on controversial social and economic issues, critiquing the nation’s racial hierarchy, offending denominational religious sensibilities, and running afoul of powerful stakeholders. And they lacked any recourse for their dismissals. Even the University of Virginia, founded by Thomas Jefferson in 1819 and designed to provide faculty with greater authority and autonomy, could not escape from the limitations placed on faculty. Jefferson himself restricted the texts used in law, as a way to protect students from Federalist writings. Moreover, his first hire, Thomas Cooper, resigned under external pressure over his religious beliefs before even beginning his position. In ensuing years, as president of South Carolina College, Cooper argued for academic freedom yet simultaneously encroached on the freedom of his faculty. He eventually lost his own position due to his provocative political stances.
In the early 19th century, the relative proportion of professors to tutors began to shift. At Harvard in 1800, there were roughly the same number of tutors and professors, but tutors still composed 75 percent of the faculty at Yale and more than 60 percent at Brown. Two decades later, professors were in the majority at all three institutions. By 1839, tutors only represented 15 percent of the academic workforce, although they remained part of instructional staffs for several decades, at some places until after Civil War.\textsuperscript{14} Their positions remained “temporary, dead-end appointments” with little opportunity for advancement.\textsuperscript{15} In fact, the status of tutors was so low that when the University of Michigan governing board declined hiring a tutor in 1847 and instead devolved the work to two other faculty members, the professors protested that the work was demeaning and beneath them. One withdrew from the work. The other eventually resigned.\textsuperscript{16} Not withstanding specific events such as these, professors had more prestige than tutors and, at some institutions, had considerable say in academic policy. By mid-century, they increasingly identified with specific disciplines and pursued specialized training.\textsuperscript{17} While professorial salaries were significantly higher than those of tutors, most institutions remained poor and salaries remained low, especially in the Midwest and among the poorer denominations.\textsuperscript{18} Retrenchment was “one of the characteristic actions of nineteenth century college trustees.”\textsuperscript{19} Indeed, Rudolph highlighted the multiple and various ways that institutions deprived professors of not only decent salaries, but also the salaries that they were promised.\textsuperscript{20}

Just as important, as the numbers of professors increased, their security decreased. Whereas the appointments of the few colonial professors had been assumed to be permanent and dismissals took place after hearings and with cause, the situation was quite different in the 19th century. Professors were at-will employees and could be removed for any offense. Without the need to justify dismissals, hearings largely disappeared as well. At many public institutions, all faculty were on one-year contracts, making their retention an affirmative, rather than default, act. Mass dismissals, while not common, were also not unknown. At the University of Michigan, when a board member submitted a resolution to dismiss a faculty member in 1851, the board acted in a much more sweeping manner. Bothered by infighting, it fired the entire clerical faculty. The University of Wisconsin dismissed its entire faculty seven years later, and did so again in 1867.\textsuperscript{21}
**POST-BELLUM STRATIFICATION**

The decades after the Civil War saw the more rapid professionalization of the faculty as increasing numbers studied in Germany, earned doctorates, assumed disciplinary identities, and came to dominate the new professional associations. This professionalization, and the correspondent ascendency of the expert, had real value for a portion of the faculty, but it simultaneously revealed two weaknesses. First, the professionalization process was, in part, fought through battles over academic freedom. The highly publicized cases of the late 19th century helped faculty make claims for authority and autonomy, but at the same time revealed the tenuous nature of their positions. Academic freedom was not yet established and faculty at both the new universities and the more numerous smaller colleges were subject to pressures, restrictions and dismissals if they offended their administrations’ or boards’ sensibilities, especially on economic, religious and social issues.22

Just as importantly, the professionalization of the faculty was linked to the stratification of the faculty. Part of this was a modernization process, necessitated by the growing departmental structure and institutional disinterest in having multiple professors in the same discipline. As such, positions of associate professors and assistant professors began to spread and form the basis of what is now considered the traditional faculty ladder, though with severe limitations on advancement to the highest level. The ladder system was not merely a means for efficient organization. It was also a way to disenfranchise what would soon become the bulk of faculty.23 As H. W. Rolfe recalled in reflecting on the beginnings of his career in the 1880s, “I saw the universities of monarchical Germany were, in constitution, essentially democratic, while democratic America’s were monarchical—an autocratic head, a favored group of important professors... and a large body of associates and assistants, some few of whom will struggle up into the estate above them, while most are forever barred from what they might have won if there had been a fair competition.”24 Domineering full professors who autocratically ran departments was a problem well into the 20th century, and was one of the significant threats to academic freedom and faculty employment in the era.

Although tutors had disappeared or were disappearing from many colleges, at the burgeoning universities they were being replaced by a cadre of similarly under-resourced and temporary (though often better credentialed) instructors. As Creutz wrote in his study of the faculty at the University of Michigan, they were used...
to “enlarge the teaching staff while preserving the authority and prestige of the chairman-professor and, at the same time, minimizing costs.” Indeed, when he proposed to the trustees that the institution add instructors to the faculty in 1870, Acting President Henry Frieze pointed to institutional poverty and the need to teach more students with quite limited funds, as well as the desire to relieve elite faculty of rudimentary work. He pointed to similar practices at much wealthier institutions and outlined a system in which professors would oversee and check up on their subordinate instructors. Michigan began the practice the next year and escalated it under Frieze’s successor, James Burrill Angell. But, these instructors remained on tenuous appointments, as did the rest of the faculty. This expansion of lower tiers of faculty, first instructors and then assistants was not merely a phenomenon at the University of Michigan. At Johns Hopkins University, “Financial problems brought a new urgency to the expedient of utilizing young men at low salaries and rotating them rather than promoting them.” Indeed, many institutions had a “sub-faculty,” at times derogatively referred to as the “scrub faculty,” from which little upward movement was possible and no permanency existed.

Faculty complained about their pay in the late 19th century, but Kimball and others have argued that they were actually fairly well off when compared to others in the workforce and their communities—an understanding Leslie captured by noting the period was one “when professors had servants.” Kimball ascribed the concern to the ascendancy of the faculty and their views of themselves as elite and deserving of being treated as such. They viewed the extreme salaries of industrial executives and sought their place among them. Yet, here, too, issues of differentiation were at play. Faculty salaries varied greatly across regions—the four institutions that Leslie studied were in the second highest paying region if the trends of the 1850s remained in place. More importantly, though, is the differentiation within institutions. “Professors” may have had servants, but they were only a part of the academic labor market. As Stricker argued, “The expansion of higher education was financed, in part, by paying the labor force less…. Instructors, who taught the most, were paid the least; worse, their average salaries fell whereas those of full professors rose.” At Wellesley College in 1879, for example, senior faculty were paid $1,500 while instructors might make as little as $300. Still, the institution was rare in at least one respect—although the faculty received low wages, they were not differentiated by gender. At other elite women’s colleges, women were

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routinely denied positions as full professor and were paid significantly less than men of the same rank. At many male and coeducational institutions, women were excluded from the faculty altogether.

After the turn of the 20th century, some viewed the stratification of the faculty as a crisis, with Stanford University assistant professor Guido H. Marx perhaps the most strident in his writing. In 1909 and again in 1913, he claimed that 50 to 65 percent of the faculty at many institutions were temporary instructors and assistants, with as many as half turning over each year. Cornell University was a prime example of the larger trend: in 1868, 64 percent of its faculty were full pro-

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fessors and 20 percent were assistants but by 1910, the proportion of full professors to temporary instructors was reversed. Nineteen percent were full professors while 35 percent were assistants and 28 percent were instructors. Marx warned of the implications for both the students who were increasingly unlikely to have the opportunity to study with renowned faculty and for the underpaid and temporary instructors who had little chance of gaining a permanent position. He highlighted the unfairness of the system and argued that luck, opportunity, and privilege allowed a minority to achieve a professorship, and afforded them salaries three to four times those of the instructors who did most of the teaching.

Based on a survey of assistant professors at the 22 Association of American Universities institutions, Marx elsewhere pointed to highly differentiated institutional conditions—whereas at some institutions assistant professors noted satisfaction with their place and influence, others experienced far more difficulty. While focusing on the problems facing junior faculty, Marx was just as concerned about the treatment of graduate students, many of whom—46 percent in his study—assumed significant debt in pursuit of their degrees. He was “deeply impressed by the deplorable effect of the system of scholarships, etc., which do not entirely support the recipient, but act as bait and encourage him to go on with graduate study, while piling up an indebtedness which, under prevailing conditions, will ride his shoulders like a veritable old man of the sea. It is a good way to break hearts.” He continued, “The manipulation of fellowships for the purpose of ‘building up a strong (i.e., large) graduate department’ lies dangerously near the immoral; and this is doubly true when the fellowship carries with it burdensome teaching duties which make of it but a disguised underpaid instructorship.” More than 100 years ago, then, the treatment of graduate students, like that of other members of the sub-faculty, was already a concern.
INTERWAR PERIOD

During the interwar period, some significant strides were made for the faculty, though not for all of the faculty. Founded in 1915, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) began to provide a faculty voice in governance and academic freedom. Over time, the organization garnered real gains for professors, and helped entrench academic freedom and tenure protections into American higher education. But at its founding, the association was for a select group of senior faculty at elite institutions. One professor and department chair, when approached to join the nascent organization, condemned it as “a self-constituted aristocracy of older men.”

Although the AAUP soon relaxed its membership requirements, its elitism was one of the considerations that led faculty to form 21 campus locals affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) in the 1910s and early 1920s. Another was a devastating salary situation during and just after World War I. At the University of Illinois, for example, an AFT local survey of faculty found a deplorable economic situation. Faculty reported the need to work extra jobs to support their families and that they could not afford basic necessities, including medical and dental care. One claimed that a family member’s death would soon surely result. But these unions were not just about the poverty and tenuousness of the faculty. They were also about its “degradation,” as a member of the Howard University local noted, especially the degradation of those who taught undergraduates and in less prestigious fields.

Salaries returned to pre-war levels for many in the 1920s, though were still differentiated and fell short of what the profession deemed suitable. And, the sub-faculty continued and at some places expanded. In 1918, in response to difficult economic conditions, the University of Washington created the rank of “associate,” one step below that of instructor. Although many were graduate students, associates were to have had at least two years of teaching experience prior to appointment and their positions were to be temporary with no chance for advancement. They were also disproportionately women. In 1920, 22 percent of the teaching staff was sub-faculty, including 60 percent of women on staff. Five years later, just over half of the staff and more than 80 percent of the women were on the sub-faculty. During the depths of the Depression, the university cut the wages of its regular faculty and sub-faculty. When things improved slightly, they restored them for the faculty, but not the sub-faculty. This was fitting with President Lee Paul Sieg’s view that instructors and associates were “underpaid

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individuals” whose problems “were still not official problems of the faculty.”36

Of course, the University of Washington was not the only institution to rely heavily on graduate students and recent graduates with low salaries. At the University of Wisconsin, more than a third of undergraduate classes were taught by graduate students in the 1930s, though the staffing was highly varied by department—some departments had no instructors or assistants, while some were composed of 80 percent instructors and assistants. And when the budget situation became dire, associates’ and instructors’ salaries were disproportionately negatively affected.37 It is, then, unsurprising that almost 70 percent of the members of the University of Wisconsin Teachers Union—perhaps the most active college faculty union in the country—were assistants and instructors. The AAUP Committee Y’s national study of higher education and the Depression offers an incomplete picture but confirms the presence of large numbers of instructors, especially at colleges with enrollments of more than 2,500. A survey of AAUP chapters found that, in the early 1930s, instructors were the single largest category of faculty (not including assistants, about whom no data was gathered), often approaching 40 percent of the faculty at the largest institutions.38 Although some institutions retained associates and instructors out of compassion in a difficult job market, the “plight of the academic underclass” was such that “the competition for non-tenure positions tended to turn new Ph.D.’s into scramblers for openings that demanded heavy workloads at cut-rate pay...”39

A NOTE ON THE “GOLDEN AGE”

In the decades after World War II, faculty and higher education more broadly made significant strides. An expanding system of higher education and an acceptance of a tenure system created a so-called “golden age” for faculty. Between 1949 and 1966, average faculty salaries increased significantly and faculty positions were far more plentiful than they had ever been.41 Yet all was not well. The faculty workforce remained highly differentiated. In the early 1960s, for example,
roughly one-third of college faculty (not including graduate students) worked part-time. Graduate students, when added to the figures, comprised roughly one-seventh of the instructional staff. As the first African American to garner a regular faculty appointment at a predominantly white institution did so in the 1940s, but clearly opportunities were severely restricted for all but white men. As Caplow and McGee argued, hiring was often influenced by nepotism and based on institutional prestige; women were entirely outside of that prestige system and “of no use to a department in future recruitment.” They argued that female scholars were “not taken seriously,” which “blighted” their prospects of a career. Discrimination on religious bases took place during graduate training and at the entry point of careers; on race it was “nearly absolute.” And, though the adoption of 1940 Statement on Academic Freedom and Tenure had created tenure protections, the controversies over communism in the late 1940s and 1950s demonstrated that professors were unwilling or unable to defend their politically suspect colleagues. They were similarly useless to those purged for their sexuality. The period was one of significant retreat from stated ideals, and pointed to an inherent weakness in the faculty.

To the extent that it existed, this “golden age” was short lived. By 1968, when Jencks and Reisman published their book declaring the triumph of the faculty, the cracks were already present. In the late 1960s, and even more so the 1970s, the economic situation and lack of input in governance was such that faculty began large scale organizing, collective bargaining and, when necessary, striking. So, too, did graduate student teaching assistants at places like the University of Wisconsin. The economic job market tightened in many fields, and retrenchment took its toll on the faculty. And throughout, the stratification of the faculty and the contingency of a sizeable portion remained constant. In his 1977 follow-up to The Academic Man, Logan Wilson simply repeated much of the language that he had used 35 years earlier to describe those of the lowest faculty ranks and status.

A ‘NORMAL’ IN NEED OF CHANGE

Contingency and casualization are among the most pressing challenges facing American higher education, but they are not new. Rather, they are deeply embedded and have, to varying degrees, been part of the staffing of colleges and universities for centuries. While the modern situation is extreme—and no his-
Historical situation is exactly analogous to another—the antecedents of the current crises exist, and at times are striking. In this essay, I have highlighted some of those antecedents, intentionally emphasizing the points of contention and the difficulties faced over time rather than providing a full and complete picture. In so doing, I have pointed to the larger structural issues in the staffing of American colleges and argued that the professionalization of the faculty was also the stratification of the faculty. While that professionalization provided great benefits to some, it simultaneously created a “sub-faculty” or an “academic underclass,” with few rights, low pay, onerous loads, little respect, and little realistic hope to ascend. As stakeholders in higher education consider, and hopefully address, the current version of this condition, it’s important to remember its long history. Temporary surges in funds, short-term efforts around an immediate crisis, or locally based solutions are unlikely to change the fundamental and longstanding problems of academic staffing. Rather, something more systemic, and perhaps more radical, is needed.

ENDNOTES

8. MacLean, College of New Jersey, p. 156.
18. Rudolph, American College, 193-200; Burke, American Collegiate Populations, p. 47.
22. Furner, Advocacy and Objectivity, Metzger, Academic Freedom, pp. 145-77; Cain, Establishing
Academic Freedom, pp. 8-17.

26. Frieze, President’s Report 1870, pp. 4-5; Frieze, President’s Report 1871, p. 23; Angell, President’s Report 1872, p. 4; Angell, President’s Report 1873, pp. 3-4.
32. Marx, “Problems Assistant Professor,” p. 19.
37. Committee on Educational Policy, “Report,” pp. 11-15; Groves, “Retrenchment at the University.”
38. Willey, Depression, Recovery, p. 25.
40. Wilson, Academic Man, p. 69.
41. Bowen, “Faculty Salaries.”
42. Simon and Grant, Digest of Education Statistics, p. 88.
45. Schrecker, No Ivory Tower; Graves, Wonderful Teachers.
47. Wilson, American Academics, pp. 69-72.

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