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“Tenured Allies” and the Normalization of Contingent Labor

By Carolyn Betensky

Even the best-intentioned tenured faculty can make matters worse for their contingent colleagues if they make a habit of not addressing the elephant in the room.

In 2017, for the second time in two years, a proposal came before the tenured and tenure-track faculty at the University of Rhode Island that would have expanded membership in the faculty senate—where only tenured and tenure-track faculty are currently entitled to participate as voting members—to include full-time lecturers and clinical faculty. It should be noted, as background, that these non-tenure-track faculty are covered, as of 2015, by a union contract that guarantees them some (though still not adequate) job security, benefits, and remuneration. Many of these lecturers and clinical faculty, moreover, have served for years on faculty senate working committees—and a few of them have even served as chairs of their departments. Their contributions to the institution notwithstanding, the bill failed to win the two-thirds majority required for adoption as an amendment to the constitution of the faculty senate.

Lecturers and clinical faculty thus remain unrepresented in the deliberative body of a university that prides itself on shared governance.

I begin with this sordid synopsis not in order to address the question of inclusive governance so much as to highlight a problem it illustrates, a problem likely to bedevil any official or ad hoc groups of tenure-stream faculty that turn their attention only intermittently to the cause of contingent faculty. The problem was that *all of us* who lobbied one way or the other on the change saw ourselves as tenure-stream allies of our non-tenure-track colleagues. Both sides felt they were acting in the best interest of lecturers and clinical faculty. Supporters of the proposal maintained that lecturers, many of whom had been on the university faculty for

upwards of ten years, deserved to have their voices heard because of their long service to the community. Depriving them of seats in the senate was an inequitable, elitist, unjust, unsustainable policy. Opponents argued that without the protections of tenure and its assurance of academic freedom, lecturers would not be able to express their genuine views on contentious issues; they stood to be bullied into taking sides with administrators or colleagues on whom they depended for their continued employment.

So there we were, enacting the very situation that prompted Jennifer Ruth and Michael Bérubé, in *The Humanities, Higher Education, and Academic Freedom: Three Necessary Arguments*, to ask rhetorically: “Is there any paradox of contemporary university politics filled with a more poignant irony than the discrepancy between (a) the efforts of well-meaning idealists who insist on the universal right of academic freedom and (b) the precarious situation of the rightless adjuncts themselves?”

Impossible Bind

All of us tenure-stream faculty members who spoke up in this debate were in various ways *right*—but our disjointed righteousness was cold comfort to lecturers, clinical faculty, and tenure-stream faculty alike. Once again, we had effectively succeeded at protecting the vulnerable from having a voice at the table. Some of the non-tenure-track faculty were outraged at what they naturally understood as a show of disrespect for them, while some of the more vocal tenure-stream faculty fumed at each other for having taken the wrong (right) position on the matter.

How had we gotten ourselves into this impossible bind that pitted the participation of our colleagues in academic governance against the notion of their own academic freedom? How could so many well-intentioned faculty members take such radically different positions from each other, all in the name of “helping” our colleagues who lacked our privileges?

While it is tempting, and certainly appropriate, to see this bind as the legacy of decades of cynical administrative decisions or the expression of a structural flaw at the heart of the neoliberal university, “badmins” and late-stage capitalism are not the whole story here. Although we were not directly responsible for creating this mess, we “tenured allies” had not made matters any better, for the simple reason that we had not been talking about these issues *regularly and publicly* before the question came to a vote. At least, this was the case in the faculty senate itself, where the continued—and in some cases increasing—reliance of university departments and schools on different varieties of contract faculty hardly ever came up in our sessions.

The tenure-stream faculty members who had expressed themselves so passionately on this one occasion were making their cases to each other, but only now. Without any prior history of sustained debate or pooling of ideas among ourselves on the disappearance of tenure lines and exploitation of contingent faculty, there could be no tenured alliance in force to demand a fair, inclusive outcome that would extend the protections of tenure to our colleagues. All we had was a fractured, frustrated collection of indignant academics who felt powerless to do anything but fight with one another, accomplishing no more than preserving the status quo.

Who needs callous administrators when tenured allies are there to undermine each other?

Normalization of Contingency

One of the arguments the bill's opponents made was that allowing lecturers and clinical faculty to serve on the faculty senate would "normalize" the practice of hiring non-tenure-track faculty. This charge of normalization, though misplaced and belated, in my opinion, does begin to get at an important issue. For the normalization of the two- or three- or five-tier system of academic employment has taken shape on the watch of *every* tenured faculty member teaching today. At the same time, however, the normalization of contingent academic labor is not an irrevocable process that began and ended before we arrived on the scene to pick up the pieces. This normalization expands and deepens continually. It does so every day, as we carry out our ordinary business of teaching, scholarship, and service.

Normalization is what happens when we ignore the fact that we are working with people who get paid a fraction of what we earn for exactly the same labor we perform. It is what happens when we inadvertently humiliate our colleagues with a thousand tiny cuts. It is what happens when we do not publicly mark their sorrows or celebrations as we do with our tenure-stream colleagues, for instance, or leave their photos off our department webpages, or not make a point of welcoming or introducing them to members of our departments when they start teaching with us. Most importantly, the normalization of inequity is what happens whenever we stop talking, or don't talk at all, or talk only when we have to about the glaring disparities in academic labor conditions on our campuses. Normalization is our continuing responsibility.

What does it mean to *refuse* to normalize substandard labor conditions for the majority of our colleagues? As Tiffany Kraft, an adjunct activist and labor organizer, wrote last year in

“The Ugly Administration of Higher Education,” a posting on the *Academe Blog*, “If mass adjunctification isn’t discussed in every faculty meeting, that’s not an oversight, it’s an endemic problem that needs correction.” Tenured allies must talk about the erosion of tenure lines as if it were a problem of the gravest urgency—because it *is* one.

We cannot take up the question of contingent labor only when it happens to be on the agenda: we need to *make* it the agenda. And the only way we can do this is to talk to each other, privately and in public forums, about what has happened, what is happening, and what is yet to happen to labor conditions under which many of our colleagues struggle on our very own campuses.

Merely talking about the casualization of academic labor will not eliminate the problem, but talking about it frequently is a precondition for the organized efforts that will.

Tenure and academic freedom are currently facing some of the most serious threats we’ve seen in generations. At the University of Wisconsin, for example, true tenure no longer exists, thanks to the machinations of the state legislature under Governor Scott Walker and his handpicked regents. Faculty at other flagship public universities, including the University of North Carolina, the University of Iowa, and the University of Missouri, worry with genuine cause that radical Republican legislators will succeed in their campaigns to eliminate tenure and destroy any semblance of academic freedom. These alarming trends should make all educators think of their own professional status as being in some sense contingent—as in, contingent upon the continuing existence of higher education.

In spite of these challenges, however, and in spite of the deeply anti-intellectual policies of the Trump administration, tenured faculty do still wield considerable power on many of our

campuses. For those of us who do not face imminent loss of our jobs, the notion that we are devoid of agency is a mode of thinking we indulge at our peril. Tenured faculty need to make use of the privileges many of us still have and talk to each other meaningfully about labor conditions on our campuses—or we will all go down, with our disciplines and the future of higher education right along with us.