

Empowering Contingent Faculty: Perspectives, Strategies, and Ideas

CONSIDERING CONTINGENCY: A CALL TO ACTION

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“Contingent” is the catch-all term that has come to connote faculty on college campuses who do not occupy traditional tenure-track lines. In some respects, the term is useful because it highlights connections and similarities among non-tenure-track faculty who otherwise appear to be a diverse group that straddles a varied set of contractual arrangements. Some fit the historic “adjunct” model: professionals with other sources of income who teach a course or two a year; but many use their “contingent” teaching as a sole source of income. Several of those “contingents” have long-term yet temporary contracts at a sole institution; far more teach multiple courses on a semester-by-semester basis at a single campus or are “roving” professors patching together a living teaching multiple courses at two or more institutions (Coalition on the Academic Workforce 2012). “Contingent” is useful then as a term to describe structures—contracts that embody varied levels of precarity but have in common that they lack the security of tenure.

What is not so useful about the term “contingent” is that its ubiquitous and routinized use means that we do not find the term jarring. Ironically, it conceals and thereby allows us to overlook the insecurity and poor conditions that it entails. To be “contingent” is to be subject to chance, something that exists only if certain circumstances prevail. When we use “contingent” as a descriptor, we generally are describing a position and, as such, it is not a personal slight. Yet, the nature of contingency is certainly a slight to those academics that lack job security regardless of their job performance. Additionally, contingent faculty often are slighted by poor working conditions and a lack of consideration and respect from tenured colleagues.

Although contingent faculty positions are not a new phenomenon, their ranks have been expanding as colleges cut costs and employ a more flexible workforce. What is somewhat new is that contingency as a status—one that is grossly unfair to the majority of its occupants and that undermines the profession—is gaining attention in academia and beyond. Under the presidency of Dr. Jennifer Hochschild (2015–2016) and with the direction and support of executive director Steven Rathgeb Smith, the American Political Science Association (APSA) created a status committee to explore issues related to contingent faculty and to assess how the association might best serve them. This set of articles is one outgrowth of the committee’s work. It draws attention to the problem of contingency in our own discipline and sparks conversation about possible strategies to ameliorate its effects. The articles are short—they are intended to provoke thought rather than offer complete answers. The Contingent Status Committee is happy to receive any responses that these contributions inspire.

The articles consider both organizational- and individual-level responses to the problems that contingency presents. The opening piece explores possibilities that APSA, as the professional body of the discipline, might contemplate. The contribution by Elliott-Negri discusses the potential of unions to empower contingent academics. He illustrates that whereas unionization is almost always helpful, the structure of bargaining units and the approaches that unions adopt are critical to how successful they are in improving working conditions for contingents. Andy Battle provides historical context for one university’s wavering commitment to universal public higher education. Vincent Tirelli and Julia Lau explore the formation and ongoing efforts of the Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor (COCAL) to advocate for improved conditions for academics in non-tenure-track positions. As a labor organization less formal than a union, COCAL arguably benefits from a grassroots focus and flexible structure driven by contingents themselves. As the Lau article illustrates, these benefits come at the cost of organizational resources. Veronica Czastkiewicz and Jennipher Lunde Seefeldt present a proposal—created at the ASPA Annual Meeting Hackathon in 2018—for a set of minimum standards for the contingent employment of political scientists. The idea is to have the proposal reviewed, revised, and adopted by APSA; insights and input are welcomed through the Contingent Status Committee.

Catherine Guisan’s article makes a provocative argument for the reframing of contingency as a matter of diversity. She observes that tenure-track colleagues and academic institutions often are attentive to concerns about diversity while also viewing increasing contingent employment as less urgent. If contingency is incorporated as a matter of diversity, she suggests, increased resources and focus might follow. Isaac Kamola’s contribution is important because it outlines strategies that academics in contingent positions might adopt to empower themselves. His ideas work even absent more encompassing institutional and organization changes. David Green’s accounting of the situation of contingent academics in Japan illustrates how societal forces beyond the realm of academia press upon and, in this case, improve the prospects of temporary workers. However, we should not rely on this. Our hope is that this collection will prompt changes, whether large or small, undertaken by our associations and organizations or by each of us individually as we think about how our actions impact the contingents among us.

Acknowledgments

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REFERENCE

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SOLIDARITY SHOULD NOT BE CONTINGENT: WE ARE LIVING IN PRECARIOUS TIMES

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"A striking implication of these estimates is that 94 percent of the net employment growth in the U.S. economy from 2005 to 2015 appears to have occurred in alternative work arrangements." (Katz and Kreuger 2016)

Contingent, precarious, non-permanent, temporary, non-tenure-track—these are only some of the terms and titles used to designate what is, by many accounts, the *majority* of the workforce in higher education. This is a startling fact but one in keeping with a trend that reaches far beyond the academy. In 2015, 17% of the US workforce was employed in "alternate employment relationships,"¹ an increase of 6% since 2005. This means that the majority of jobs created in the United States during that decade were precarious in some regard. Against this backdrop, the role of the recently created APSA Committee on Contingent Faculty in the Discipline—"to bring attention to issues that impact contingent faculty in the discipline and to determine how APSA can best engage and support them"—seems both daunting and urgent.

The Scale of Contingency in Academia

Available data highlights the increasing prevalence of precarious employment in academia. A 2011 survey of faculty revealed that 29.2% were tenured or tenure-track, 51.4% were part-time,

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and 19.4% were full-time but non-tenure-track (Curtis 2014). In contrast, in 1975, more than half (55.8%) of faculty were tenured or tenure-track, 12% were full-time non-tenured, and 30% were part-time (Curtis 2014). Similarly, another source reports that the tenured-to-non-tenured ratio was 45% to 55% in 1975 and 30% to 70% in 2015 (American Association of University Professors 2018).²

Still another survey of part-time faculty found that 81% had been teaching for three years or more, that contingent academic work was the primary occupation for 77%, and that only about 25% preferred part-time work over a tenured position (Coalition on the Academic Workforce 2012).³ The data illustrate that these

faculty do not fit the historical notion of an "adjunct"—that is, a professional teaching a specialized course while maintaining a full-time job outside of the academy. APSA's Graduate Placement Survey reinforces the decline in the traditional tenure track: only 26% of PhDs on the job market were placed in tenure lines in 2016/2017, down from 41% in 2009.

What Can We Do?

What can a professional association do in response to this ubiquitous trend? Fortunately, models for action—from the ambitious and costly to the modest and inexpensive—are available.⁴ They are listed as follows relative to the resources they require:

- *Educate Members.* Several academic associations, including the Coalition on the Academic Workforce, publish data on the number of contingent faculty as well as actions and policies for departments to consider.⁵ This includes strategies to encourage appropriate respect, resources, and inclusion for faculty in contingent positions and best practices for hiring contingent faculty as well as those from contingent lines for tenured positions. See Czastkiewicz and Lunde Seefeldt in this spotlight regarding the development of a document for APSA that can be promoted to members and department chairs.
- *Support any efforts by contingent faculty to unionize.* The presence of unions improves pay and conditions for non-tenure-track faculty across all dimensions (Segran 2014). If support is not possible, at least remain neutral.
- *Join with other academic associations* to advocate for ratios of and appropriate resources for non-tenure-track faculty to be considered as part of accreditation for colleges and universities (Kezar, Maxey, and Eaton 2014).
- *Further reduce or eliminate costs* of association-membership and conference-registration fees for part-time faculty (Inclusive Fees Campaign 2015).
- *Consider hosting a "virtual conference"* to facilitate greater participation by contingent faculty. Cultural anthropologists have tried this for environmental causes (Nevins 2018).

- *Encourage networking with contingent colleagues around conferences.* Professional associations could host networking events and invite contingent faculty from nearby campuses to attend (Chernoff 2018).
- *Offer portable benefits* such as health, dental, term life, and disability through APSA to contingent faculty in the discipline. The Freelancers Union (2018) provides a model for promoting these benefits.

Why Should We Act?

The most obvious reason to address increased contingent employment is that it is simply the right thing to do. We should