

CHAPTER 6

CONTINGENCY, SOLIDARITY, AND COMMUNITY BUILDING: PRINCIPLES FOR CONVERTING CONTINGENT TO TENURE TRACK

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Threads: Professionalizing and Developing in Complex Contexts; Local Changes to Workload, Pay, and Material Conditions

In the fourteen-campus Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE), the Association of Pennsylvania State College and University Faculty (APSCUF) has worked towards labor justice for contingent faculty by establishing principles that can empower adjuncts, enact inclusion and fairness for them as members of our academic communities, and provide contingents fair access to the tenure track. While a variety of labor problems persist, APSCUF has done much to improve the working conditions of non-tenure-track faculty, including in the collective bargaining agreement (CBA) “the right to the grievance procedure, sick days, personal days, and health and welfare benefits” (APSCUF) for all contingent teachers.

A key provision of the CBA (the “11G” clause, named for its section of the document) mandates that each department develop a procedure for voting on the conversion of temporary faculty to the tenure track. Additionally, this policy is intended to protect and value the contributions of non-tenure-track faculty, providing a path to more stable employment, while encouraging campuses to pay greater attention to their uses of contingent teaching.

The official PASSHE contract term for contingent faculty is “temporary,” even though many such colleagues serve for years, even decades. The conversion clause reads as follows:

G. 1. Effective with the Fall 1999 semester and each fall semester thereafter, a full-time, temporary FACULTY MEMBER, who has worked at a University for five (5) full, consecutive academic years in the same department, shall be placed in tenure-track status, if recommended by the majority of the regular department FACULTY in accordance with the procedure developed by that department FACULTY. Such FACULTY shall complete the tenure procedure as provided in Article 15. This Section shall not apply to FACULTY MEMBERS whose salaries are funded by a grant.

2. Time spent in a temporary or regular full-time position at the UNIVERSITY may be counted toward the required probationary period in accordance with Article 15, Section B. 22. (APSCUF)

Our differing departmental cultures—the Kutztown University English department where Amy is a tenured associate professor and the West Chester University English department where Bill is a tenured full professor—produced differing policies in the application of 11G and revealed differing pitfalls and advantages of specific approaches to achieving contingent faculty justice through conversion to the tenure track.

Our department cultures differ in several ways that create variations concerning contingency—and highlighting, in some cases, the need to achieve collegial community as a contributor to, if not a prerequisite for, individual workers' justice.

The Kutztown University (KU) department is moderately sized (thirty-one tenureable faculty, seven temporary) and is formally divided into two faculty groups according to major: English, including both the literature and the composition and rhetoric faculty; and Professional Writing. The West Chester University (WCU) department is very large, including seventy tenureable faculty, ten temporary, and no formal disciplinary units, with all faculty simply categorized by rank or tenureability. In addition to majors in professional writing and English, the latter spanning both literature and rhetoric, KU's program includes a minor in literature, a concentration in cultural and media studies, and an M.A. also combining literary and rhetorical study. Most KU faculty teach some general education composition, and temporary faculty are not limited to teaching general education courses. WCU's program, on the other hand, includes minors in many areas of English studies, but a major in which students choose a literatures track or a writings track, and separate M.A. concentrations in literature; or in writing, teaching, and criticism; or in creative writing. All WCU English

faculty teach some general education literature or composition, but contingents (with the exception of one creative writer and occasionally part-time faculty who help supervise student teachers in our Secondary Education program) mostly teach only composition or business writing.

We are able, though, despite the differences of department cultures, to identify a clear set of principles that can make contingent faculty conversion to the tenure track a successful way to achieve inclusion and fairness in our workplaces, at the same time that we strengthen our composition communities. Below, we offer nine such principles and, where possible, note how our experiences at KU and WCU elucidate the benefits or challenges of applying them.

PRINCIPLE 1

Departments should advertise for, and hire, real compositionists for composition-teaching jobs, not Jacks- and Jills-of-all-trades. We wouldn't hire a literature instructor who's only studied, or loved, composition, would we? Then why do we, too often, advertise for generic "English M.A.s," when the literature-centric default mode of many graduate programs means we'll be hiring literary specialists without much interest or experience in composition? Among the recommendations the Conference on College Composition and Communication provides for teacher preparation and continuing development is "to study research and other scholarly work in the humanistic discipline of the teaching of writing" ("CCCC Position Statement"). CCCC, in a context wherein faculty have a variety of English Studies backgrounds, acknowledges the vital role that disciplinary study plays in good teaching. Unless the size and faculty makeup of your department requires a cadre of true generalists, hire people not for their willingness to teach any class tossed at them, but for their expertise in a single area for which the department has a regular, long-term need.

Especially in departments with strong salary, benefits, or working conditions for contingent faculty, the attractiveness of the positions in a perennially tight job market should allow a department to advertise nationally (at least through listservs—a low- or no-cost approach) and draw on strong composition graduate programs rather than advertising for anyone available. If your institution is in a populous, multi-university region with a large number of degree holders in the job market, you should be able to find compositionists, not generalist English instructors. We should advertise for specialties, and mentor toward conversion in those specialties. This not only assures that faculty are more comfortable in their teaching assignments, but also makes contention over expertise less likely when professors are considered for conversion.

For example, at both of our institutions, temporary faculty with degrees in

literature, hired to teach composition-heavy schedules, have been considered for conversion into tenure-track positions in composition; the current process of applying 11G in WCU's English department virtually requires that any contingent faculty converted to the tenure track be defined as, and assessed for tenure as, specialists in whatever they've taught the most. Therefore, at WCU, most adjuncts (except for one creative writer who was assigned to teach many creative writing courses) are, supposedly, prepared for the tenure track (including advanced and graduate writing studies teaching) as scholarly composition specialists. Tenured and tenure-track composition professors are at times divided over how to handle these situations. On the one hand, the pedagogical knowledge that comes with years of teaching composition, regardless of one's degree, should be respected and recognized. At the same time, what Stephen M. North calls the "lore" acquired by teaching composition (23-33), though it may be valuable and workable, is not necessarily sufficient, especially in departments (like both KU and WCU) where compositionists must bring a theorized and historicized understanding of the field to a Cultural and Media Studies (KU) or Writing, Teaching, & Criticism graduate program (WCU). We also must recognize, of course, that expertise comes not only from a degree program, but from what happens after one graduates. Indeed, many of the most widely-known and respected composition scholars hold degrees in literature, having found the field or had a scholarly epiphany only after completing the Ph.D. We should further acknowledge the hypocrisy of hiring individuals to teach writing—often for many, many years—yet telling them, when conversion becomes a possibility, that they are not qualified to do so (Lynch-Binieck).

We also recognize that regularly converting professors with other specialties into composition lines may underscore the already hierarchical structure of English departments in which literature is often privileged over writing. That is, literature degrees are often seen as sufficient qualification to teach writing, but a composition degree does not qualify one to teach literature. Further, given that temporary lines dominate in composition, national searches for tenure-track positions might become the domain of literature. Working in a system that already often treats composition as an also-ran, compositionists may resent any departmental practice that further reifies the composition-slighting, pedagogy-disdaining departmental hierarchy. Altering our practice at the point of hire may, at least to some degree, indicate an equal valuation of teaching and scholarship, and a mutual respect for literature and composition within English Studies.

Of course, departments may not always have the time to search exclusively with expertise in mind. Exceptions exist, as in hiring faculty to cover sabbatical or emergency leaves or immediately after a retirement. Therefore, if we do hire or convert faculty to positions outside of their degreed specialties, it should be

with the expectation that they will receive mentorship and do scholarship in the area for which they are hired. (We'll comment more on mentorship and on support for adjunct scholarship later.) Further, the provision of better mentoring and scholarly support for contingent faculty does not address the overall adjunctification of higher education and adjuncts' potentially precarious employment stability or second-class salary and benefits.

PRINCIPLE 2

Hire contingent faculty with as much care and attention to their long-term collegial and scholarly roles as you demonstrate towards regular tenure-track faculty. Though contingent hiring may not have the funding for some rituals of national searches, many of the on-campus activities that identify the best tenure-track faculty can be applied to contingent faculty. Hire early (not last-minute); discuss scholarly interests; include a teaching demonstration and meetings with prospective colleagues; get student input.

At KU and at WCU alike, we are still challenged to hire early; often administrators do not release temporary lines until late in the spring. Changing the culture of hiring, then, requires lobbying and likely even bargaining for reform beyond the departmental level. Nevertheless, at KU we have otherwise made the temporary faculty hiring process parallel that of the tenure track. While it has not been easy, requiring more work from hiring committees and additional financial expense for a budget-strapped department, it has also allowed us to find faculty for whom we are a good fit, and vice-versa.

PRINCIPLE 3

New faculty should all be made directly aware of a conversion clause and any departmental policies guiding it. In the PASSHE context, new temporary faculty could ideally be advised that the 11G clause amounts to a "ten-year tenure track" for those who seek it. The job advertisement could even allude to the convertibility of the position from contingent to tenure-track, for suitably interested candidates.

At the same time, temporary faculty should be told at hire whether or not the department sees them as potential permanent faculty. For example, an adjunct might be hired at the last moment to fill an unforeseen need and not be ideally suited for the position. In such circumstances, the job should be clearly framed as a single-year position with the option for renewal. Such honesty avoids the unethical practice of keeping temporary faculty in limbo, unaware if conversion is indeed an option the department will offer; and it keeps departments from

treating the first-year composition courses, which contingent faculty most often teach, as unworthy of the same attention to staffing as upper-level courses.

PRINCIPLE 4

Make sure all current or longstanding contingent faculty are credited for doing satisfactory service according to the real requirements under which they were hired—“grandparent” them into qualification when any new requirements for conversion are established by the department or the administration. As we have noted, there’s a hypocrisy in some of the conditions and assumptions we traditionally bring to contingent hiring: we hire you to teach composition, potentially for decades; we then deny that you have any professional qualifications worthy of permanent scholarly employment. It is vital that, as we adopt new conditions and assumptions, no matter how necessary, we acknowledge contingents’ good-faith service and adherence to the standards we set in the past. Grandparenting contingent faculty into any new tenurability conversion system is plain fairness. Moreover, it allows us to acknowledge the value of professional development completed in composition while in contingent positions. Similarly, our regular tenure-track hiring ought to give preference points to applicants we know. Too often, contingent status is treated as a mark of unsuitability for the tenure track—as if it’s better to hire new instructors with little experience, about whom we know little beyond a carefully crafted dossier, rather than the contingent down the hall whose teaching and scholarly opinions we’ve known for years, and whose service has been endorsed by repeated rehiring for years.

PRINCIPLE 5

Maximize contingent faculty access to the complete collegial life of the department: meetings, policy discussions, social events, scholarly discussions, committee service and funding for professional development. But don’t require such participation where it is not at least indirectly rewarded or evaluated. Where contracts do not forbid contingent faculty from voting, include them in the governance process. Remember that informed participation requires context: the more we include all faculty in our departmental culture, the better they can contribute. When adjunct colleagues are included in professional discussions, they can bring their experience and insight to bear accordingly. In the PASSHE system, temporary faculty’s participation in departmental culture varies greatly from campus to campus, and even from department to department.

At Kutztown University, the English department took years to normalize the involvement of temporary faculty in meetings and committees, and the result,

we believe, is not only a richer department, but one in which contingent faculty want to work. At the same time, the right to vote is occasionally contentious, as in instances when some constituencies fear being out-voted. We need to be vigilant in safeguarding the participation of all of our colleagues. As Coordinator of Composition at Kutztown, Amy is also very aware of the power dynamic at work when she asks temporary faculty to join committees or attend events. She encourages contingent faculty to serve on perhaps a single committee in their first year, and only if they feel the work will benefit their conversion or job search. Even so, she grapples with the truth that, in a tenuous employment position, they may take on more work than they feel is practical, despite reassurances. Having been an adjunct herself once, she doesn't blame them. No easy solutions exist, beyond good communication and monitoring for abuse. At KU, contingent faculty in English now have long been empowered in the membership of the department, which has made questions of conversion to tenure track easier. KU's tenured faculty have worked more closely with their contingent colleagues; contingent faculty have regularly had voices in policy discussions.

West Chester University's Department of English is now working to change a culture in which contingent faculty were not expected to participate in—or, by some tenure-track colleagues, were specifically denied access to—departmental life beyond their own classrooms. The changes are occurring both because of a change in the department leadership—the current chair favors inclusion and has previously been a union liaison to contingent faculty—and because the 11G conversion process has alerted tenurable faculty to the imperative of knowing their contingent colleagues more fully. At WCU, Bill's view is that, possibly because of the sheer size of the department (largest department of any kind in the fourteen-campus state system), whole-department communication and exchange is extremely difficult. Tenured faculty, not just contingent faculty, have complained about being outsiders to decisions made in committees; the problem was serious enough that a dean convened a task force with an outside mediator to attempt to improve communication in early 2014. Committee service is enacted at a distance from central departmental discussions; and this structural challenge pushes contingent faculty further to the margins. In Bill's past service as writing program administrator for the department's first year composition program, he found it very difficult to bring tenurable and contingent faculty together for program policy discussions: tenurable faculty seldom wanted to contribute to composition policies; contingent faculty, sometimes “freeway flying” among campuses in metropolitan Philadelphia, had little time—and earned no service recognition—for policy meetings. The leadership of WCU's English department has, until recently, not invited contingents to department meetings, and has previously excluded contingent faculty from almost all committees. A

new set of department bylaws, as well as a consciousness of the value of service as a guideline for suitability for conversion, encourages more committee service and collegial engagement for contingents in future.

PRINCIPLE 6

Evaluate contingent faculty for their whole set of academic talents, just as you evaluate tenure-track faculty: for teaching, but also for collegial service and scholarship. Conversions in the Kutztown University English department were largely possible because we had an official record of teaching, scholarship, and service to discuss for each contingent faculty. Having worked side by side with tenure-track faculty on committees and extracurricular assignments, these professors became less easily reducible to a name and a schedule, the anonymous person in the bullpen office taking up the mantle of “Professor Staff” (Street et al.) this semester. At West Chester University, the conversion process and individual conversion qualifications are highly problematic because of the lack of any regular assessment of scholarship or service. Indeed, WCU English effectively forbids most temporary service by not inviting temporary faculty onto most committees. WCU English uses the same annual performance review forms for tenurable and for contingent faculty, but the electronic document provided for contingents, in its sections for comment on “Scholarly Activity” and “Service,” is pre-completed with the letters “NA” in the blank spaces. Contingent faculty deserve access to evaluation in the same categories, with the same standards of expectations and rigor, as tenure-track faculty. Evaluations should never be pro forma.

As noted, though, we should not require service or scholarship unless it’s recognized and rewarded—that is, we should require it only for adjuncts seeking options for tenurability or promotion. It is problematic to expect further work from contingent faculty who may already be over-burdened by first-year composition schedules that come with a significant paper-grading load, especially if they are working out of their specialty or have no interest in conversion.

PRINCIPLE 7

Encourage contingent faculty to embrace the agency of self-identification by academic field and by career-track preference. Potential temporary faculty should have the right to choose whether to take on the service and scholarship challenges that would lead, potentially, to conversion to the tenure track. Does the instructor just want to teach a class or two as a sideline to her main priorities in work life? Or is she focused on a full-time academic career that might develop more completely as options become available, as mentoring is offered, as great work is

valued? A “one-size-fits-all” job description for contingent faculty demeans the individuals, and the variety of talents and areas of expertise and life goals, of our contingent colleagues. In PASSHE, the “Statement of Expectations” carries legal weight: annual performance reviews, and thus re-hiring, or tenure and promotion, are made with reference to expectations achieved or not achieved. When all Statements of Expectations for contingent faculty are the same—declaring all to be compositionists, or all to be limited to teaching a slate of courses that may not be appropriate to the available faculty expertise—we are doing a disservice to faculty and student alike.

PRINCIPLE 8

Mentoring is a basic element of collegial initiation and a powerful tool for professional growth, and thus should be available to all faculty, tenure-track and contingent equally. Mentoring of all faculty is crucial, especially when professors are hired to teach out of their degreed specialty or when they are not familiar with the culture of academic scholarship—or the culture of a particular department. If we hold contingent faculty to meet standards of teaching, scholarship, and service, as we do tenure-track faculty, then we should offer contingents the same support. Indeed, in its own “Statement of Principles and Standards for the Post-secondary Teaching of Writing,” CCCC insists upon the need for all composition faculty to “have access to scholarly literature and be given opportunities for continuing professional development” in the field. We will note, below, other ways universities can do this, but here we argue that mentoring is both a right and a responsibility for creating and sustaining a collegial community. Mentoring applies to service, scholarship, and teaching alike; since it contributes to faculty performance, it is an essential ingredient in providing well-informed and effective pedagogy to our students. Part of the regular mentoring process that each faculty member deserves, contingent or conventional tenure-track, should be guidance toward tenurability, including conversion-position strength.

PRINCIPLE 9

Support contingent faculty for whom the tenure track means embracing composition as not just a teaching assignment, but as a scholarly endeavor. Be generous not only with mentoring, but also with financial support for additional academic coursework, conference presentations and opportunities for publication of every kind. Such support means that traditional tenure-track faculty may have to sacrifice their usually exclusive proportion of available funding and institutional support for scholarship, and must share available resources. But given the common his-

torical inequity with which contingent faculty have been provided salary and benefits and fair material conditions—even as contingent faculty work is often structured in order to free tenurable faculty to publish, earn salary raises, and become promoted—it's high time to institute a culture of equal sharing in the departmental community.

CONCLUSION

For any of these recommendations to work, administrative buy-in is required. Deans and provosts must be willing to support the policies and costs that result in fair practices. Advocates need actively to work for reform not only on the departmental level, but throughout the institutional administration and system. This is not an easy task, but allies are sometimes easier to find outside a Department of English than within the department. Deans and provosts and granting units often see the value of building a faculty that is better at teaching writing—a faculty that brings research-based savvy to produce assessable products of written communication and distinctive ways of connecting writing and thinking. We, as experts in composition and rhetoric, are well equipped to bring our arguments for a strong, permanent, justly-inclusive, collegial community of writing specialists into the tenure track to build better composition programs for the benefit of our student writers.

While we chose these principles in respect to their application to our specific contexts, adoption of them beyond the PASSHE system might bend the curve toward justice for adjuncts even where union-supported conversion to tenure track isn't an apparent option. In *Reclaiming the Ivory Tower*, contingent-faculty activist Joe Berry contends that we have to act like unions even when we're not legally organized in unions; likewise, departments can create conditions in which contingent faculty are obvious candidates for secure positions by treating them as likely candidates for those positions from the beginning. Our CBA mandates some version of that process, but nothing precludes any department from developing one on its own. Justice is the journey before it is the arrival.

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