

Chapter 12. Where to Start?

An Overview of the (Ab)use of Contingent/NTT Laborers and a Call for Radical Transparency to Assist the New Faculty Majority

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The (ab)use of contingent and non-tenure-track (contingent/NTT) individuals in higher education has been an ongoing conversation. For the past two decades, universities have hired more contingent labor in lieu of full-time, tenure-track (FTT) positions (“Background Facts”). While these positions are “on the fringes” (Schreyer 83) when it comes to full involvement in university culture, contingent laborers make up the majority (more than 60 percent) of instructors at the collegiate level (“Background Facts”) and account for about 1.5 million instructors in the United States alone (“Characteristics of Postsecondary Faculty”). In other words, contingent/NTT are the new faculty majority.

Contingent/NTT individuals often do not have stability in their roles. A devastating example of the precarious nature of these roles is the life and tragic death of Margaret Mary Vojtko. She worked for 25 years as a per course instructor at Duquesne University, made roughly \$10,000 a year, was not offered health insurance, was left in a destitute situation in which she was unable to afford heat and often rent, and died due to health complications (Dorfeld A8).

Considering this and other situations, we offer an overview of some of the present data regarding contingent/NTT labor to better illustrate such ab(use). For general higher education, many contingent individuals

- teach the equivalent of a full-time course load (“Background Facts”),
- have contracts at multiple institutions to make ends meet (“Background Facts”; Colby and Shultz Colby 61),
- are provided little recognition for their scholarship (which would assist many in career aspirations) as well as “virtually no time to carry it out” even though many are actively engaged in research (Doe et al. 444),
- may also be graduate students who are told that teaching is an “apprenticeship” that will enhance their graduate studies when, in reality, this work

- “distracts from, rather than complementing, graduate studies” (“Background Facts”),
- have dwindling chances of obtaining FTT positions due to limited availability (“Background Facts”) and the collapse of the humanities job market (Micciche 434),
 - are at institutions that use differential workload distribution, “which reinforces hierarchies, marginalizes teaching, and makes success difficult to achieve, even for those contingent faculty with a research component as part of their workload” (Doe et al. 438),
 - lack access to resources such as “offices, computer support, and photocopying services” (“Background Facts”) as well as research databases, and office phones (Doe et al. 444),
 - have their working hours kept below “the thirty-hour per week threshold established by the 2010 Affordable Care Act that would trigger access to employer healthcare benefits” (Goldstene qtd. in Kahn et al., “Introduction” 6), and
 - “receive food stamps” (Goldstene qtd. in Kahn et al., “Introduction” 6).

Narrowing the scope to the English/writing field, most of the previous information is similar, with the following added specifics:

- Adjuncts are the instructors of “more than 70% of general education writing courses” (Kahn, “Anyone Can Teach” 363).
- In some institutions, “part-time faculty [teach] more than 95 percent of the first-year writing courses” (McBeth and McCormack 43), which leads to “burnout and intellectual stagnation” (Colby and Schultz Colby 65) due to the high paper count, grading, and mental load.
- Eighty-three percent of technical and professional communication service courses are taught by contingent/NTT individuals (Melonçon and England 399).
- Research shows many adjuncts lack access to teaching support (Colby and Shultz Colby 57).
- Contingent/NTT instructors suffer from professional disrespect (Kahn 592) and the “de-professionalization of teaching” (Melonçon et al. 130).
- At some institutions, pay raises are based not only on performance reviews and student evaluations but also on D/F/W rates, placing primacy on student retention instead labor conditions (Nardo and Heifferon 39), and many institutions lack structured pay increases that come with promotions for contingent/NTT faculty members (Colby and Shultz Colby 62).

We argue, like Anna K. Nardo and Barbara Heifferon, that pushing past a rhetoric of despair mentality is necessary when approaching the current labor issue (27) and suggest that a deeper understanding of contingent labor(ers) is

necessary, for as James Rushing Daniel suggests, such an understanding may encourage solidarity among faculty of all ranks (65) to better support the larger goal of creating and enacting equitable labor practices. In this chapter, we offer our snapshots of the experiences of contingent faculty members to humanize some of the data, and we suggest tangible calls to action at the local and system level.

Katie

During 2015 and through most of 2020, I served in a plethora of contingent roles including graduate research assistant, writing center consultant, assistant director, graduate teaching instructor, adjunct, and three-fourths-time NTT assistant professor. This past year, I found myself in a fortunate position where my three-fourths-time NTT position transitioned to an FTT position. I want to share that I acknowledge my experience is an exception to the norm that contingent laborers face.

In my master's program and my Ph.D. program, I was fortunate to have graduate assistantships that paid for my courses and provided a monthly stipend. While earning my master's degree, I was paid a pre-tax amount of roughly \$956 a month (for nine months) with no health insurance, and during my Ph.D., I earned roughly \$1,500 (for nine months). The cost of most of my health insurance was included, but I had to pay for activity fees, which were usually around \$1,000–\$2,000 a semester. With this stipend, I could pay for housing (with contributions from roommates and then a spouse) and food, but I found myself struggling financially (to pay for undergraduate debt, gas for my car, and other utilities).

To help pay for my studies, I contracted myself out as contingent labor elsewhere. During my Ph.D. studies, I worked 20 hours per week in my English department, four hours per week in a secondary writing center, and taught two to five additional courses as an adjunct elsewhere. With these additional sources of income, I found myself able to make ends meet, but I also found myself extremely stressed and disappointed in myself due to the lack of attention I was able to give to my doctoral studies. During my third year in my program (2019), I started looking for full-time jobs and was lucky to find a contingent, three-fourths-time position that would pay more than my current contingent labor combined. For comparison, and to offer transparency, this position came with a \$46,000 salary.

In this position, I taught a 4/3 load and had service requirements, such as serving on two committees and starting a writing center. During this time, I also taught two to three overload courses (depending on the semester). I, like many other contingent laborers, tried to root myself in the system in hopes that I would be offered an FTT position. While in this three-fourths-time position, I found that (even with the unpaid service and paid overload work) I had more time to dedicate to my dissertation work and research, and I also quickly started developing my research activist agenda based on my experiences as a contingent laborer. I would like to note that at times I did feel overworked, but for most of that time I felt overwhelmingly thankful for having a position with a sense of security.

I was offered an FTT position the following year (2021). As part of this new position, I would teach one more class and direct and further develop the writing center. However, the institution shared they would not be able to pay me a full-time wage immediately. Rather, I would get small bonuses, over a period of several years, to get me to a full-time salary. Out of excitement and chasing a sense of security, I accepted this position. However, I have since left teaching.

Sarah

My career in academia began in the fall of 2011. My experiences in the decade since have illuminated several issues that affect contingent laborers and that reveal the extent to which these individuals are used and abused.

Two weeks before my first semester as a master's degree student, I was offered a graduate teaching assistantship. I was grateful and immediately accepted. I found out later that the position paid \$955 per month for teaching two courses and did not include medical or any other kind of insurance. While I did receive a tuition waiver, I was responsible for paying for fees, books, transportation, and other necessities. Rent was over half of my monthly income even in the small town I lived in, which was nearly an hour commute to the university, and moving closer was impossible due to higher rents. In other words, I was not paid enough to live near my place of work.

Therefore, instead of completely leaving the full-time employment I had before graduate school, I moved into a part-time position. This meant that I worked in an office for four hours each weekday morning, drove an hour, taught two courses, attended my graduate courses, held office hours, and commuted home another hour. During my "off" time, I created lesson plans, gave feedback on student writing, conferenced with students, and completed additional teaching-related work. For all this, I was paid \$955 per month.

However, I felt that my hard work and lack of resources would be worth it. I worked almost constantly to finish my master's degree in two years and was ready to begin my career. I was told—and I believed—that I would easily find a position and that it would certainly be full time, with benefits, and in a place that fit my needs.

I quickly realized, however, that most permanent, full-time positions required or preferred a Ph.D. degree. What was available to me were mostly adjunct positions or full-time, non-permanent positions in different states that would require me to uproot my husband and our children. This option seemed impossible since we had little to no savings after two years of graduate school.

I, therefore, applied for and was offered an adjunct position at the university where I received my M.A. I was paid \$700 per credit hour, which, for four classes, was about \$1,900 per month. I had no insurance, and I still could not afford to live near the university. Although my income was higher, I was essentially teaching a 4/4 load and being paid about 50 percent less than FTT faculty members teaching

the same load. Eventually, expenses, including payments on student loans, accumulated, and I took on an additional adjunct position at a community college. This position paid \$660 per credit hour and added three courses each semester to the four I was already teaching. It also required more commuting, more grading, and additional planning due to differing program requirements.

After two years of adjuncting at two schools and, because adjuncts are not paid in the summer, eventually adding a third institution where I could work in the summer, increasingly I began to feel symptoms of burnout, so I applied and was accepted to a Ph.D. program. It offered a stipend of about \$1700 per month, included health insurance and a tuition waiver, and offered a scholarship for the first semester. Although the pay was low, I was able to publish and get needed experience in teaching upper-division courses and in administrative work as an assistant director of first-year composition.

Upon completion of my Ph.D. program, I secured a full-time teaching assistant professor position that includes adequate pay and benefits. Although it is a one-year renewable contract, the stability and income are a significant step up from my previous adjunct and graduate student work.

Taking Action

We offer our experiences to bring increased awareness to the precarious nature of contingent/NTT work in higher education. Low pay, a lack of benefits, high workloads, and increasing burnout are real issues that are important to tackle. We know several adjunct instructors and graduate students personally who have faced food and housing insecurities, who have had to go without medicines and treatments, or who have had to create online fundraisers to make ends meet—all while working for top-tier universities with multimillion dollar budgets and all while engaging in the same teaching load as full-time faculty members. In an effort not to just discuss and highlight these issues but to take action on them, we have developed an activist agenda that presents possibilities for change.

To create real change, we must recognize the “wicked problem” (Murray 235) of contingent/NTT labor issues. This work should start locally and should stem from listening to contingent/NTT individuals. We follow the efforts of Kahn et al. to provide “concrete steps to fight . . . exploitation of contingent faculty” (“Introduction” 7). Many scholars have argued that equitable pay, a seat on governance boards (both departmentally and institutionally), and compensated professional development opportunities are needed (Bartholomae; Kezar and Sam; Mazurek; Melonçon). We add to this discussion a call to start locally at individual program, department, and/or institution levels. Then, larger transdisciplinary, cross-institutional collaborations can begin to address the larger, systemic issues.

First, we suggest that *radical transparency* is necessary. In business fields, transparency is the idea of an open-door policy where employees can share frustrations with the organization. Radical transparency goes a step further to in-

volve sharing information to prevent informational silos and to present feedback, frustrations, innovations, and ideas to all levels in the organization (Reid and Rout; Scott). For the field of English/writing studies, radical transparency applies to sharing experiences, data, instruments, and resources and to housing this information in centralized, accessible locations. We suggest that local work within one's own institution, department, or program is a first step to better understanding the community within that institution/department/program—the individuals within that community and the division of labor, tools, and activities.

One way to create radical transparency is through institutional ethnography (IE). IE draws on data from interviews, case studies, focus groups, textual analysis, discourse analysis, autoethnography, participant observation, and archival research. Michelle LaFrance and Melissa Nicolas explore ways that IE can be used to uncover the activities performed by an individual in an organization and what factors shape these activities (130). We extend their work to contingent laborers and their experiences. Marjorie L. DeVault suggests IE typically involves three stages:

1. Identify an experience.
2. Identify some of the institutional processes shaping that experience.
3. Investigate those processes to describe analytically how they operate as the ground of experience. (20)

Because material conditions within departments and programs can differ (Kahn et al., "Introduction" 10), IE creates an opportunity to better understand each individuals' experiences, thoughts, frustrations, and ideas for solutions. Rather than TT scholars offering blanket solutions, hearing directly from contingent/NTT laborers about the tensions and aspects of labor that aren't addressed in literature is fundamental to developing real, impactful solutions.

To identify some of the institutional processes shaping contingent laborers' experiences, those who wish to take action could collect survey responses, job descriptions, and interviews from contingent laborers in their departments. By hearing directly from those impacted, researchers and activists may begin to see potential for support. Khan et al., for example, suggest that many times there are a variety of solutions we can turn to support our colleagues ("Introduction," 10), some of which may be non-monetary. These may include creating helpful onboarding documents, ensuring release time for professional development, hosting social events, and more. However, though non-monetary aids are beneficial, we do not wish to detract from the fight for equitable wages.

Second, sharing experiences and findings with the field is necessary. Possibilities for sharing may include publishing articles that include datasets and providing access to narratives, implementation descriptions, models of policies and procedures, and other resources. By sharing these materials openly, our field can achieve three goals:

1. Create a richer understanding of the English/writing studies workforce;
2. Invite more collaboration and innovation on a cross-institutional basis for tackling this issue; and
3. Draw upon more data to conduct replicability studies, create research-based sustainable solutions, and/or share information with administrators to support contingent/NTT laborers.

Working toward achieving all of these goals can better the English/writing studies field by providing more sustainable and impactful research (Melonçon and St. Amant 129). Sharing data, instruments, and solutions is part of the process toward creating radical transparency. Our field tends to be supportive in its sharing of information—especially on listservs like nextGEN and WCENTER. However, it can be very difficult to find information, even when using the archival services these listservs provide. Having a centralized location where resources, data, and instruments are shared can benefit the field by making more information easier to access. Rather than creating silos, let's create a centralized location for support.

In addition to these larger goals, the local level is an important first step. Katie, for example, has worked closely with two new adjuncts to help improve their experiences. She is working on an onboarding document to situate new faculty members to new hiring requirements, grading/teaching dates, and campus resources, and she hopes to organize events where all faculty members can mingle (post-COVID-19).

As a new contingent/NTT faculty member, Sarah has been well supported by her department. She received funding that provides support for professional development during the first semester. In addition, the department holds asset-mapping meetings that are attended only by contingent/NTT faculty members (to allow for confidential, open dialogue) in which individuals can discuss benefits of the position as well as present ideas for bettering their experiences. Contingent/NTT faculty members also have opportunities to participate in committee work and governance that positions them to have a voice within the department and program.

While these efforts and experiences are moving in the right direction, we also recognize that systemic changes require radical transparency at higher levels, so we are also collecting data from contingent/NTT laborers through a grant funded by the Council for Programs in Technical and Scientific Communication (CPTSC). We hope to use this data to accurately document experiences and conditions from our field and share this information in a centralized location.

Conclusion

Contingent/NTT laborers' work is "essential, meaningful, and even central to the function of colleges and universities" (Doe et al. 432). As Chris Anson says, it is

time to “stop reflecting . . . and do something” (qtd. in Reed 135). To start paving the way, we must listen to these laborers to learn about their activities, needs, requests, and experiences. Small, local work that studies labor and activities is an important first step. Then, sharing information in transdisciplinary and cross-institutional settings will create solidarity and alliances that are helpful against divisive forces (Daniel 65).

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