Chapter 2. From Tenure Track to Unemployment in Six Months

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My first full-time teaching job was at a public university in Pennsylvania. It paid well. I was able to walk to work and maintain a strong family life. In February of 2014, I was given a contract for the 2014-15 school year. Then, in May of 2014, I was sent a letter that the university had cancelled my contract due to "unforeseen budget factors." Fifteen other full-time contingent faculty were also let go at the same time. It became clear to me then that faculty contracts are only written with one party in mind—the university.

The public university in Pennsylvania reassigned the classes from full-time contingent faculty to graduate students who would work for much lower pay. Nationwide, universities pay 80 percent less for adjunct instructors and graduate student labor than for full-time, tenure-track faculty (Bettinger and Long 598). Because of this, it is not a surprise that contingent faculty are frequently replaced by lower-wage adjuncts. However, this practice often starkly contrasts with extravagant spending in other parts of the university, from construction projects to high-paid administrators and management.

Throughout my time teaching at this public university in Pennsylvania, news articles regularly described the profligate spending on things like driveway lighting, flowers, and other personal expenses by the president of the university (for example, Guza and Wojcik). The campus was also undergoing massive construction projects, including new privatized dorms, at a time that the number of students was decreasing because of demographic trends. As I left my office on my final day of employment, I passed a million-dollar marble staircase that had just been built. I also passed a tour group as the guide was bragging to parents that the university had over "90 percent full-time faculty." I thought to myself, *not anymore*. In the seven years since I left this school, it has eliminated over 200 full-time faculty jobs through retrenchment and by not replacing professors who have left (Gardner). At the time of this writing, the school remains in a financial crisis with many more jobs at stake.

Losing my job at this public university in Pennsylvania resulted in difficulties that reverberated throughout my personal life. Because I was laid off in May, I was unable to secure a position for that fall due to the short time before the start of the fall semester. Luckily, my spouse had a steady job, but that also meant my job search was location-bound. Because we could no longer afford childcare, we made the decision that I would focus on searching for academic jobs and caring

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for our children rather than taking a job outside of academia. I spent most of those days searching and applying for jobs, making lunch for the kids, changing diapers, and trying to avoid depression about submitting over 100 applications without any success. In most cases, I did not even receive an email rejection from the colleges. The applications merely disappeared into a void.

My experience of struggling with balancing an academic job with family life and then having a job search with family obligations is common. Nationwide, according to a Harvard University Graduate School of Education Collaborative on Academic Careers in Education (COACHE) survey, 52.6 percent of faculty members are parents, and 12.3 percent are "caregivers for a dependent adult" (qtd. in Mathews). And, according to the COACHE survey, 40 percent of women and 32 percent of men who are parents "somewhat disagree" or "strongly disagree" with the statement, "My institution does what it can to make personal/family obligations (e.g. childcare or eldercare) and an academic career compatible" (qtd. in Mathews [table]). Balancing work with family obligations is often difficult in academic careers. This difficulty is compounded by other challenges adjuncts face including the pressures of an academic job search. Personally, I found myself regularly struggling with guilt for either spending too much or too little time on my job search or with my family.

At first, as I stayed home, I felt lucky. I was able to be with my children at an important time of their childhood. I had security that many adjuncts do not have—a spouse with a good job. Though, after a few months, we realized the situation would be more difficult than we had originally thought. My student loan companies would not allow me to consolidate my loans, nor would they let me defer them, so we ended up in severe economic trouble. I had to cash in my small retirement savings from the public university in Pennsylvania and take out three different personal loans that would take five to six years to pay off. This created extreme financial and emotional stress. Many adjunct and contingent faculty members face a similar struggle balancing student loans with the low wages from their employment.

My family also struggled with health-related bills. While we had health insurance through my spouse's job, we could no longer afford the copays, prescription costs, and deductibles because of my lost salary. Because of this, some of my health problems that need maintenance quickly deteriorated. Struggling with obtaining healthcare coverage is common among those employed as contingent and adjunct labor. According to a press release by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) that detailed a survey the organization conducted, "fewer than half of survey respondents have access to employer-provided health insurance; nearly 20 percent rely on Medicaid," and, similar to my predicament, "about 45 percent of faculty surveyed have put off getting needed healthcare, including mental healthcare" ("'Army of Temps'"). Over time, often these neglected health issues compound, leading to increasingly worse outcomes. Many contingent faculty end up leaving the field as a result of health difficulties, being a caregiver, and other health-related financial stress.

These problems are widespread in higher education. Contingent and adjunct faculty often do not have job security, lack benefits, and are regularly paid wages that do not support basic living expenses. According to the AFT survey of contingent and adjunct college faculty, "41 percent struggle with job security, reporting that they don't know if they will have a teaching job until one month before the beginning of the academic year," and 75 percent do not know if they will have employment from one term to the next ("'Army of Temps'"). Job insecurity has been proven to have negative impacts on mental health, physical health, and general social well-being (Menéndez-Espina et al.). With contingent faculty in a constant state of physical and emotional stress, often this impacts all areas of their personal and professional lives.

After an extensive job search, I was able to secure my second full-time contingent teaching job at a private university in Pennsylvania. It was two-and-a-half hours away from home, but my spouse and I agreed it was too good of an opportunity to turn down. After being hired, I learned that the branch campus where I was employed was under threat of closure. Because of this new information, my spouse did not relocate to the area. With two small children, this created many problems. We raced to find childcare, transportation, and a small apartment to rent near the new school. This created a lot of unexpected costs. At one point, because of these unexpected expenses, I determined that my family would have been better off financially if I had worked at a minimum wage job closer to home. Because, like many in the teaching profession, I had a passion for being in the classroom, my family made many sacrifices for me to continue teaching.

This job at the private university was the most difficult and the most rewarding job of my career. There was a hiring freeze at the branch campus where I worked. Because of this, every time an employee left the university, the rest of the faculty and staff pitched in to make up for the loss. At one point, the academic dean was doing the job of four people who had left for other jobs. Many contingent professors, including myself, regularly served on three to four academic committees, advised, supervised clubs, helped with orientation, tutored, and had many other duties as well. Most of us were thankful to have a teaching job, so we served in any way that we could in order to retain our jobs.

Personally, I ended up working 25 or more hours a week with service-based assignments on top of my teaching schedule. This did not leave much time for professional development. While I am proud that I did maintain a research agenda throughout this period, my output paled in comparison to other faculty members who did not have extensive teaching and service expectations. Also, because of the school's financial problems, younger professors were given the title "visiting" even though we were considered full-time continuing professors. This allowed the university to pay us less money and to easily eliminate our positions at any point. The "visiting" title also served as a place marker of when we were hired. Many of the "visiting" professors had terminal degrees, extensive research

experience, and more teaching experience than some permanent faculty; however, because of when we were hired, we were given this status as temporary.

It would not be until years later, with some reflection, that I realized how difficult this experience at the private university had been. I was passionate about the service assignments I was given. As chair of the campus' committee on diversity and inclusion, I was able to work with students and colleagues to create a more equitable college on many levels. I regularly volunteered as a tutor in the campus' learning center and frequently stayed beyond my required hours to help students. I was on other committees that did valuable work, served on the faculty senate, and regularly advised 20 or more students each semester. I truly loved this work. However, teaching a 5-4 load on top of these service assignments and working two-and-a-half hours from home impacted my physical health, mental health, and family life. Overall, I am thankful to have had the experience, but it was a costly one in many ways.

The job at this private university ended up lasting for five years. In my fifth year, the school decided to essentially eliminate the liberal arts. All liberal arts classes would be transitioned to distance learning or farmed out to a community college consortium. This meant my position would be eliminated. Even though this was a difficult ending, given the circumstances, the university treated us relatively well. The university gave us one-and-a-half years' notice of the transition and a small payout at the end of our contract. Cynical colleagues viewed this as an attempt to prevent lawsuits. However, given my experience at my first university of being fired after signing a contract, I knew that universities have no obligation to give contingent faculty advance notice or a payout. While the payout seemed generous for someone who had served five years like me, for those who had worked 30 years and were near retirement, it seemed like a small consolation.

Once again, I entered the job market. After filling out over 100 applications, the call that I had been waiting for came—a tenure-track job interview. A few weeks later, in March 2020, I was offered a tenure-track job near St. Louis. Then, within days, the country began shutting down because of the COVID-19 virus. I received a phone call from the school explaining that they were still planning on hiring me, but the paperwork would have to wait until they had a better picture of the impact of COVID-19. From March until July, the phone calls were the same—*We need you. Every person on campus is still committed to hiring you. We are just waiting for the governor to approve some educational funds*.

While my family and I were waiting for the contract, we were fixing up our house to put it up for sale, packing, and looking for houses in the St. Louis area. At the same time, I was teaching online and trying to negotiate problems associated with the pandemic. My spouse and I were helping our kids with online school, checking out schools in the St. Louis area for our kids, talking with our kids about the move, and trying to make sure they were doing well throughout the pandemic. Then, in July, the final call came—the school in St. Louis retracted the job offer because of COVID-19. We were devastated and relieved at the same

time. While we were extremely disappointed about the loss of the job, we were relieved that we would not have to move in the middle of a pandemic.

This experience of losing a job due to the pandemic was not unique to me. According to Dan Bauman, writing in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* in April 2021 and citing U.S. Department of Labor statistics, "Since the World Health Organization declared a pandemic in March of 2020, institutions of higher education have shed a net total of at least 570,000 workers . . . . Put another way, for every nine workers employed in academe in February 2020, at least one had lost or left that job a year later." As a different article from *The Chronicle of Higher Education* noted in February 2021, "Colleges have lost about 12 percent of their workers nationwide during the pandemic" (Gardner). Experiences like my own, having a job offer retracted, are more difficult to quantify. However, it is clear that these retractions happened frequently as well. Many social media accounts, as well as podcasts, chronicled these experiences, including the podcasts *Teaching in Higher Ed* with Bonni Stachowiak and *The Professor Is In* with Karen Kelsky. Kelsky, on behalf of *The Professor Is In*, posted to *Twitter* on the subject multiple times, with hundreds of replies from professors who had job offers retracted.

Even though it was July when I lost the tenure-track job offer in St. Louis, I was lucky enough to find employment on a contingent basis for the following fall at another public university in Pennsylvania. While teaching at this university, I encountered struggles similar to those faculty were facing all over the country. However, because I was in a contingent position at this university, often the challenges were more difficult. For example, for most of the summer, the faculty at this school were told to expect to be teaching in person for the fall semester, although, because of the pandemic, we anticipated being moved online at any time. Because of this situation, all new faculty members were expected to take a four-week class focused on teaching online. What I did not learn until later was that we were not compensated for taking this class. While I could understand this being a part of the service expectation for tenure-track faculty members, for those of us who were only teaching for a semester or two, it seemed reasonable to expect compensation.

Unfortunately, the enrollment at this second public university decreased in the spring, so there were no classes for me to teach that semester. In a little over six months, I went from having a tenure-track job offer to negotiating unemployment. My experience is not unusual. I have many colleagues and friends who have had it much worse. The problem is that struggle, instability, student loan debt, and lack of healthcare coverage are the norm for most contingent labor. Currently, contingent faculty members are the core of the university; under current conditions, universities cannot run without this labor force. Unfortunately, contingent faculty are often invisible and expendable.

After six months of being unemployed, I began looking for jobs outside of academia. I spent a lot of time researching how to make a living through freelance writing. I was excited about and fearful of this prospect. I knew that I could make

some money through writing, but I did not think it would be enough to support our family. Regularly, I would waver back and forth from excitement about the possible change in career to sadness about leaving academia. I would get angry at myself for spending so much time on a Ph.D. and putting my family into incredible debt, only to be forced out of the profession. However, I had started to come to terms with this transition. In many ways, I experienced each of the stages of grief throughout this experience.

Then, in May of 2021, I received another important phone call. It was from a private university in Florida. After I had viewed my academic career as dead, I now had a job interview. Academic job interviews are normally stressful. This stress was compounded by the pandemic. I had spent the previous year teaching on Zoom and isolating with my family, so the idea of flying, interviewing in person, and doing a presentation and a teaching demonstration was unnerving. After a long process, I was hired for a continuing position.

While my story at the private university in Florida is just beginning, I find myself hopeful and fearful. In the pre-COVID-19 era, academic jobs were already precarious. Now, they are even more so. I am conflicted thinking about my friends and colleagues who are still struggling as adjuncts. Most of them have worked just as hard as I have. Many of them have a more impressive curriculum vitae. Yet, they are still struggling. I find myself thankful for my position and feeling guilty about their struggle. While my current job has more stability than my previous positions, it is still contingent. Because of this, already I have been struggling with how to balance advocacy for adjunct and contingent labor with maintaining my current position. It is an invisible and unclear line to negotiate. Only time will tell if I can do it well.

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