Conclusion. Labor-Informed Graduate Education

Amy Lynch-Biniek
Kutztown University

When Natalie invited me to write the conclusion for this collection, she asked me to consider two questions. Given your experience, research, and organizing, would you do it all again? Would you advise others to pursue a career as a higher education faculty member?

I am tempted to answer "yes" to the first question, as I have been so fortunate. I recognize that I embody so much unearned privilege that made a career in higher education a bit easier. I'm a cishet, able-bodied, childless, White person. I have a supportive partner with a well-paying job and an extended family who contributed to our success. This means that, while the odds were still stacked against my status as a tenured full professor, I had significantly fewer hurdles to overcome in a system still riddled with sexism, racism, ableism, and homophobia. I enjoy many aspects of my job: I teach courses I like that I had a hand in designing, and I feel supported in my research and scholarly goals.

At the same time, I struggle to do my job well as public higher education is defunded and as administrations begin to serve corporate forces more than educational ends. Nancy Welch's description of the effects of neoliberalism on higher education has always stuck with me as particularly apt: "The work of education is to be carried out by angels in the austerity's architecture, shepherding programs without monetary support and formal workload recognition" (137). As part and parcel of that, I must also reckon with the fact that my success is in part endowed by the exploitation of the majority of workers in my profession: historically, too many tenure-line faculty members have been willing to sacrifice the compensation and stability of contingent colleagues in the fight to secure their own. The COVID-19 pandemic has only underscored the effects of this exploitation, as we see many protections and services offered to full-time faculty members not extended to adjuncts, from the ability to move sections online to the availability of free testing on campus.

The second question—would you advise others to pursue a career in higher education—is trickier, but it's one I've had to answer often. I teach in my campus' Master of English program, and many of our students hope to adjunct or already are adjuncting at local community colleges. Some plan to apply to doctoral programs with the goal of being professors. Every semester, at least one undergraduate student emails me asking if we can chat about how they might do what I do. I feel compelled to educate our students on two fronts as they decide whether to

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pursue a career in higher education: a labor-informed view of academic careers, and the necessity of organizing for labor justice in that sphere.

Labor-Informed Preparation

I have always been honest with my students and colleagues regarding how much of my career has been dependent on good fortune. While I am smart, hardworking, and dedicated, those adjectives describe most of us in higher education. How then, given the context and challenges described by the authors in this collection, did I become a full tenured professor?

While I was teaching ninth and tenth grade English, my father, also a high school teacher, suffered a heart attack. He had long been supplementing his income by adjuncting at local colleges. His medical event meant he needed coverage for his evening college courses; he told his chairs that he just happened to know someone with a master's degree who could step in. I taught the remainder of his courses that semester, and one of the campuses offered me an adjunct position the following year. So, my first gig in higher education was due to the coincidence of emergency need and familial relationship. As Natalie says in her introduction, I was in the right place at the right time. I was convenient.

When I decided to make the leap from working in secondary education to working in higher education full time, I did so with no knowledge of its systemic labor practices. I was able to perform well and even really to enjoy my work despite my ignorance of the problems described so well in this collection in part because my partner had a well-paying job that extended health coverage to me. I knew nothing, really, about the employment structure of my chosen career beyond what my contract told me. I didn't know about attacks on shared governance, the replacement of tenure-line jobs with adjunct positions, or the systemic defunding of higher education.

A year into adjuncting, though, the cracks began to show. Despite teaching four courses across three campuses and directing the writing center at one of them, I was making less money than I had as a high school teacher. I found practicing good pedagogy challenging in the spaces I was allowed to use. How was I supposed to hold one-on-one conferences in an office with two desks and one computer shared by fifteen adjuncts? (No exaggeration, I promise.) When a full-time position opened at the community college employing me, I was overjoyed at the potential for upward mobility—until I realized that all fifteen adjuncts working in my department were applying and that outside candidates were being interviewed as well. (I didn't get the job.) Another employer offered to clear out a literal closet to make me an office, as I was teaching on two part-time contracts on that campus and seemed to need a home base. I was invited to exactly one department meeting. A tenure-line colleague asked me why I hadn't attended the university's holiday party. I had to explain that as an adjunct, I wasn't invited. "You're an adjunct?" he asked in disbelief, "But you're here all the time!"

I decided to go back for a Ph.D. with the naive sense that it would of course lead to a tenure-line job with better circumstances. It was only when I began the doctoral program that I learned the degree would be no guarantee of more stable employment. I read Henry A. Giroux's *The University in Chains: Confronting the Military-Industrial-Academic Complex*, James Sledd's *Eloquent Dissent: The Writings of James Sledd,* and Marc Bousquet's *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation* and discovered that the time, money, and passion I was throwing into the doctorate would likely result in the same piecemeal teaching jobs and low pay I was already experiencing.

My coursework completed, I continued adjuncting as I dissertated. I applied to a tenure-line opening at Kutztown University on a lark, never expecting to be offered the position. It was just the sort of job I wanted, but I was ABD and had only one publication under my belt. They wouldn't want me. This was a *practice* application. Sure enough, I was not invited to be interviewed that fall. That spring, however, I heard from the search committee: the position was open again; was I still interested? I was the fourth-place candidate who got the job only because numbers 1-3 said *no, thank you*. I didn't mind. I made the most of my good luck, and I didn't have to worry about childcare or chronic pain; no one questioned my sexuality or demeaned me for the color of my skin. I have been mansplained and denied promotion, but I've persisted.

As many of the authors in this collection demonstrate, sustainable tenure-line positions are in the minority; most of us persist in non-tenure-track jobs of many flavors, each with their own challenges and opportunities. This is why I share the story of my career with graduate students and with you, why I think that collections like this one are important to share and assign. Many graduate students begin as naively as I did, imagining the path to and experience of *professor* very differently than the reality. I think we have an ethical obligation to prepare all graduate students to enter academia with eyes wide open, armed with knowledge of the systemic issues higher education faces.

Specifically, I assert that graduate coursework should familiarize students with the teaching and employment contexts they are likely to encounter after graduation. As my co-writers and I—Anicca Cox, Tim Dougherty, Seth Kahn, Michelle LaFrance—explain in "The Indianapolis Resolution: Responding to Twenty-First-Century Exigencies/Political Economies of Composition Labor," "we relish teaching students who love the subject to which we have dedicated our own careers, but the responsibility to prepare them for the material realities that come with a graduate degree or an academic career in English is clear" (57).

First, we need to educate graduate students about the range of positions and institutions in which they may work. Too often, if graduate programs mention careers at all, it is to mark employment at R1 universities as the only respected goal. And yet, David Colander and Daisy Zhou, writing in Pedagogy, report that "overall, slightly fewer than 50 percent of the graduating students from

all programs get tenure-track jobs, and about 20 percent get non-tenure-track teaching positions" (140). Little attention is paid in graduate education to careers in community colleges and teaching-intensive institutions (like the one where I work), or to professors of practice and part- and full-time non-tenure-track positions.

Labor-informed preparation also concerns acknowledging the hurdles to teaching well in an academic culture that still values scholarly work above teaching. Most graduates will move into teaching-intensive positions, yet teacher preparation has long been minimized in much of graduate education, relegated to a single course, a workshop, or a seminar. Even more rare are programs that consider the contexts beyond the teaching assistantships that fuel them; Colander and Zhou documented that graduates are more likely to teach in programs ranked lower than that from which they graduated, with a focus on teaching undergraduates (141-42). Even so, too many graduates must rely solely on the experience of teaching in a context that will not match the jobs they will hold after graduation, with limited coursework and guidance in how to teach students across contexts. Graduate students should be made well aware of the challenges they may face in the classroom that have nothing to do with their skill or dedication and everything to do with the material conditions on their campus and the specifics of their contracts.

The second prong of the Indianapolis Resolution calls for pedagogy that "draw[s] explicit attention to the reality that material conditions are teaching and learning conditions—that current labor conditions undervalue the intellectual demand of teaching, restrict resources such as technology and space to contract faculty, withhold conditions for shared and fair governance, and perpetuate unethical hiring practices--as the central pedagogical and labor issue of our times" (Cox et al. 40). It is not the employment status or the title of professor per se that affects teaching but the support, respect, resources, and pay given them.

A 2013 study by the National Bureau of Economic Research "found that new students at Northwestern University learn more when their instructors are adjuncts than when they are tenure-track professors" (Figlio et al.). What's more, we know that contingent faculty members are often productive scholars and perform a great deal of campus service, even though both are often unsupported and unreported in their departments (Doe et al. 438-42). They are succeeding *despite* their working conditions, not because of them.

That faculty members regularly inspire students, create original research, and just keeping coming back is testament to how much they love education. That love drives many of us to work hard despite discouraging circumstances. But that love doesn't pay rent or provide healthcare coverage. Teaching graduate students about the labor structure of higher education admittedly doesn't change that system, but some instruction in advocacy and organizing might contribute to change.

Organizing for Change

During graduate school, when I was first learning about the intricacies of the employment system, a scholar of academic labor spoke at a campus event. During the meet and greet with graduate students afterwards, I expressed my excitement about perhaps organizing adjuncts like me on my campus. "Don't do it," was his reply. He said I'd lose my job, that organizing wasn't worth it. For a long time, I was angry with him; while my adjunct status made me more vulnerable, to be sure, the advice to do nothing denied my agency and my right to fight for my own well-being. The many successful instances since of graduate students and contingent faculty members organizing demonstrate that this agency is real and powerful.

As a tenured professor now, I think I understand that scholar's warning, although I still think it was unhelpful. He was aware of the fragmentary way that labor is addressed on campuses, the way in which tenured faculty members often ignore or pay lip service to the need for a more just campus without doing anything to address it, the fear of reprisal that grips untenured faculty members, and the genuine risks that contingent faculty members take when organizing.

Even so, I have come to see labor organizing as a key component of my job, even though it is not in my job description. If I am to teach well, serve students, be fair to my contingent colleagues, and take care of my own health and well-being, I have no choice but to embrace advocacy as integral to every aspect of my job—service, scholarship, and teaching. I feel this responsibility acutely given my beginnings as an adjunct and my privilege as a tenured professor. While I have long and loudly argued that tenured faculty members especially have a moral obligation to do this work, I have also come to understand that this work must be intersectional and collective, uplifting and protecting the most vulnerable among us. The work of organizing for workplace equity should be the responsibility of all faculty members, not simply the purview of the most vulnerable; at the same time, those most empowered by the current, broken system should not center themselves. This is why Seth Kahn and I argue that we need organizing—collective work grounded in worker solidarity—rather than activism—often focused on individual work or leadership (Kahn and Lynch-Biniek).

In a conversation with Seth Kahn, I lamented the enormity of addressing systemic labor issues in higher education. He observed, "Working for change isn't hopeless, but it is *hard*." We have a lot of hard work ahead of us. Indeed, I believe that one way we teach is by modeling *how we work*. We do this, in part, by standing up for ourselves and each other when working conditions are precarious so that we can work well, serve students, and take care of ourselves, too.

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