

Discourse of the Firetenders: Considering Contingent Faculty through the Lens of Activity Theory

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The past forty years of higher education have seen a sea change from a corps of full-time, tenure-line faculty to a largely contingent workforce. This has been the subject of extensive analysis and criticism. Scholars such as Jack Schuster and Martin Finkelstein (in their 2006 comprehensive analysis of faculty data), as well as professional organizations (including the American Association of University Professors [AAUP] and the Coalition on the Academic Workforce), have offered substantial statistical representation of this phenomenon. Scholars have also considered the status and working conditions of contingent faculty through lenses ranging from labor relations (for example, Rhoades) to pedagogy (for example, Jaeger and Eagan) to feminism (for example, Schell). And official position statements, conference discussions, calls for action, and special recognitions for contingent faculty have been issued by many professional organizations, including AAUP, the American Historical Association, the American Philological Society, the American Studies Association, the College Art Association, the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), the Modern Language Association (MLA), and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE).

Efforts by these individuals and organizations to improve working conditions have included calls for, among other things, long-term and renewable contracts, or what is sometimes called the *humane lectureship* (Brumberger; Robertson, Crowley, and Lentricchia), teaching tenure (Hudson; AAUP, “Conversion”), and unionization (Berry; Samuels; Schell and Lambert Stock). On a national level, however, change has been uneven, and in many local settings, it has been minimal, leading Donald Rogers and colleagues of the Organization of American Historians to conclude in May 2009 that “across disciplines, part time instructors remain a marginalized and

beleaguered lot” (6). Compounding the difficulties, the economic crisis of 2008–2010 threatened modest advances made in recent years.

This lack of progress on a national level leads us to a new interrogation of contingency as a strategy in academic hiring. Perhaps it can be acknowledged that what was once a stopgap response to a short-term labor problem is now a fully entrenched system of multi-tier faculty roles. Despite the resilience of this system, with the exception of work focusing on faculty organizing, most efforts by scholars and professional organizations appear to be stalled on the assumption that traditional approaches will one day be restored.

We suspect that this assumption is incorrect, and thus we turn to activity theory (Leontiev, *Activity*; Engeström, “Activity” and *Learning*) to redress structures that are often treated as sacrosanct yet are actually susceptible to change. Addressing some of the more important factors shaping the status and working conditions of contingent faculty, and acknowledging the lasting nature of the shifts in faculty hiring that have occurred, we explore the multiple roles that contingent faculty play in an evolving system of higher education. We ground our discussion in an analysis of reports offered by instructors working in contingent positions in the arts, humanities, sciences, and social sciences at a large land-grant university in the West. One of those instructors, Adam (we use pseudonyms throughout), cogently summed up the enduring problem this way:

Despite playing a role that is in no way “contingent” to the mission and day-to-day operations of the university, adjunct instructors are still treated institution-wide like wandering day-laborers who have or expect very little power to advance themselves within the university or college where they teach.

FRAMING THE ANALYSIS

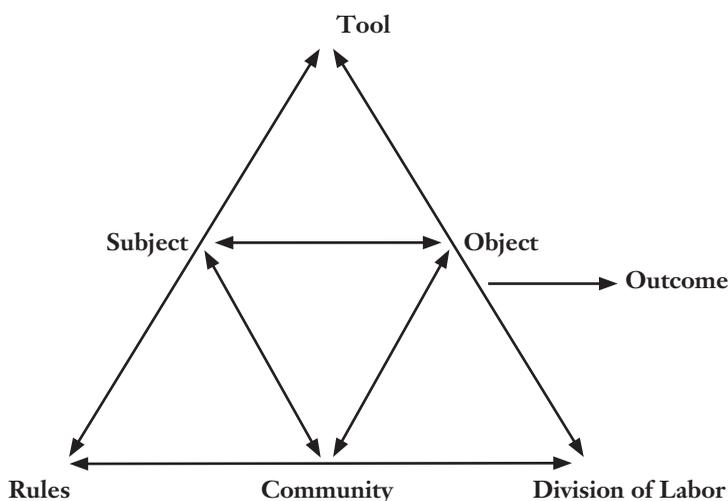
We frame our study of contingent academic labor by drawing on activity theory, which emerged from a focused effort, beginning in the 1920s in the Soviet Union, to develop a Marxist-Leninist alternative to Western psychological theories. The leaders of this effort, most notably Aleksei Nikolaevich Leontiev, Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky, Mikhail Basov, Sergy Rubinshtein, and Alexander Romanovich Luria, developed a psychological framework that considers the actions and motivations of individuals and groups as they engage in activity. Collectively, they advanced a theory that posits activity as goal-oriented, mediated work that is shaped by—and in turn shapes—social, cultural, material, and historical contexts (for a comprehensive treatment, see Kaptelinin and Nardi; Wertsch).

In the late 1970s, following the translation of Leontiev’s work, activity theory attracted the attention of Western scholars, particularly those in human-computer interaction (Cole and Engeström; Engeström, “Activity” and *Learning*; Wertsch; for

a review of work in this area, see Bertelsen and Bodker). Later, educational theorists became interested in activity theory, particularly after Yrjö Engeström, drawing on Vygotsky's work, extended Leontiev's theoretical framework in ways that enhanced our understanding of the zone of proximal development (for useful discussions, see Russell, "Looking Beyond"; Kaptelinin). Within the field of rhetoric and composition, activity theory has been used to challenge discourse-community theory and to study text production among writers who do not share membership in a particular community (see Bazerman and Russell; Russell, "Activity Theory," "Rethinking Genre," "Writing," "Russian"). Figure 1 presents Engeström's elaborations of Leontiev's work in activity theory.

Engeström's model is well suited to analysis of work in the academy. Within an academic department, for instance, the object of activity can be understood as the goals of the department: to educate students, produce scholarship, conduct outreach and service, and (in public institutions) to advance the general welfare of the citizens of a state. The outcome, in contrast, is the actual result of the work carried out in pursuit of these goals. The subject is an individual who interacts with other members of the department to form the community working to achieve its goals. Rules govern the activity of the subject and community, while division of labor allows for differentiation in the work done by members of the community, such as support staff, teaching faculty, faculty focused primarily on the production of scholarly work,

Figure 1. Engeström's elaboration of Leontiev's activity theory.



and department administrators. A tool is a means of achieving an object. Within an academic department, tools might include language itself (to communicate, share ideas, and develop new ideas), as well as theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches. Tools would also include more tangible objects, such as books, computers, paper, desks, chairs, telephones, and so on.

Viewing academic work as an activity system allows us to explore the intended and unintended outcomes of our work; the manner in which that work is shaped by various contexts (cultural, social, historical, physical) and tools; the division of labor; and the nature of the interactions among individuals and the communities they form. Scholars who use activity theory, however, do not assume that individual action and meaning-making are fully determined by larger social structures. In his work on activity theory, Leontiev argues that members of a group working within an activity system will neither think nor react in exactly the same way to particular events. Extending this observation, Anna Stetsenko has recently argued that sociocultural influences and individual decision making have a co-regulating effect.

The differing actions and reactions of individuals within an activity system give rise to one of its most important elements: contradictions. Because work within an activity system is mediated—in particular, through language, but also through the other tools that are used within an activity system—individuals, with their divergent backgrounds, experiences, and abilities, can differ in their interpretation and understanding of work within the system. Engeström calls our attention to the importance of contradictions that arise from these differences, arguing that it is through these contradictions that goals, tools, and divisions of labor (among other aspects of activity systems) can change.

As new activity systems are implicated in the delivery of higher education, established systems resist and accommodate in a cycle that can be interpreted as not only problematic but opportune. Well-established activity systems, including tenure systems and the work of professional organizations, evolve alongside and influence other nested and overlapping activity systems (see figures 2 and 3). These new systems include efforts to establish new approaches to long-term security of employment; local initiatives to align composition instructors with labor unions; and work by professional organizations to develop policies regarding contingent faculty. These activity systems can be seen, in turn, as taking place within—and being shaped by—other activity systems, such as departments, colleges, universities, disciplines, professional organizations, labor groups, and state and federal governments. So, when instructors within a department at a small college in the Midwest work together to replace semester-to-semester contracts with multi-year contracts, their efforts might be influenced by labor actions at other institutions; state laws affecting hiring practices in higher education; actions and resolutions sponsored by professional organizations; and efforts by tenure-line faculty at the same institution

Figure 2. General nested activity systems (A) and the non-tenure-line governance activity system (B) at Colorado State University

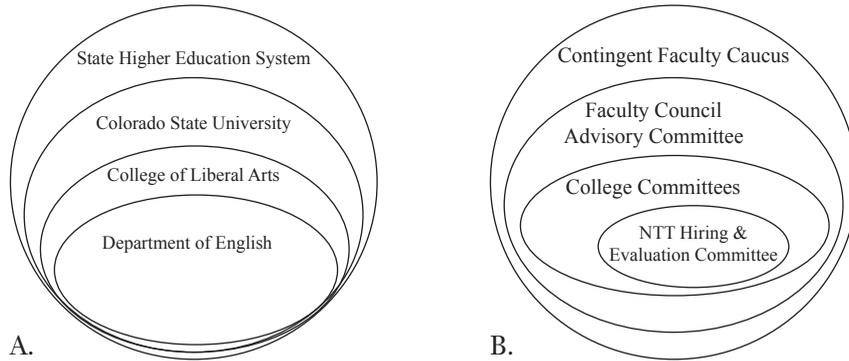
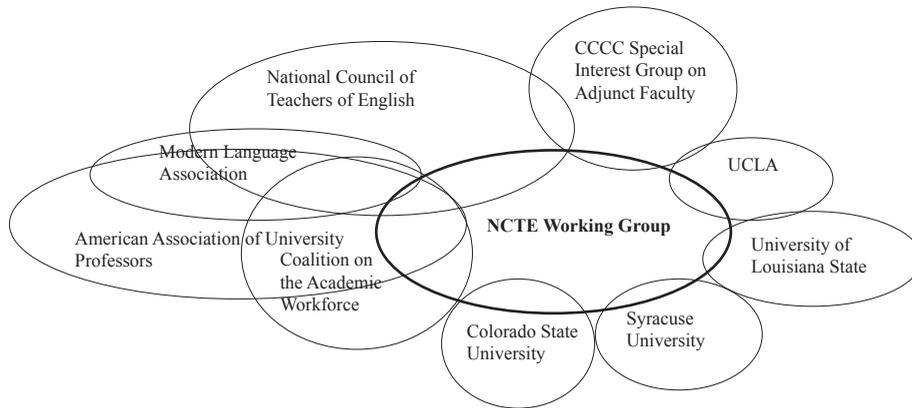


Figure 3. Overlapping activity systems shaping the work of the NCTE College Section Steering Committee Working Group on the Status and Working Conditions of Contingent Faculty



to establish a union. In turn, the actions of the instructors at the small college affect other systems, both locally and nationally.

At the same time, the work performed by people in contingent positions, which might once have been understood to be work in service to the labor of others—hence the term *adjunct*—might now be understood as essential, meaningful, and even central to the function of colleges and universities. Leontiev’s metaphor of the firetender is

useful here, as he describes the essential role of the person, typically a woman, who in hunter-gatherer societies kept the fire burning while the hunters searched for food (“Genesis”). The firetender’s role, while abstract, was essential, making it possible for food to be cooked and consumed in a timely way, thus conserving calories and enabling survival (60–62). Using this metaphor, Leontiev argues that labor is social and built upon relationships of mutual dependence. But Leontiev doesn’t stop there; he argues that such labor may be undertaken not simply to accomplish a larger social goal, but also because it is transformed into interesting and important action in and of itself. This is firetending as satisfying work. Bringing the metaphor into the present day and an educational setting, Leontiev says of the student, “You started to read a book because it was necessary. You continue to read because it is interesting” (64).

In the following section of this article, we consider the professional work of faculty in contingent positions at Colorado State University through the lens of activity theory, analyzing workplace discourse logs (see figure 4) in an effort to understand the roles of contingent faculty in teaching, research, service, outreach, and administration, especially as those roles come into conflict with traditional academic activity systems such as tenure and promotion. We also consider the ways in which these roles differ from department to department, thereby altering local activity systems and, when juxtaposed, shedding light on alternatives. In particular, we focus on the contradictions that arose as a result of these faculty members’ reflections on their work.

GROUNDING OUR DISCUSSION

Our discussion is grounded in the participant-observer research of eight full-time contingent faculty from varied disciplines, including art, English, history, psychology, business, and environmental health. This research was part of a larger qualitative study undertaken by Sue Doe that involved twenty-two contingent faculty members from seven of the eight colleges at Colorado State University. The study investigated the varying roles, motivations, and status of these faculty members while also providing context for purposeful cross-disciplinary conversations. In addition to several other data-collection approaches, each participant maintained the workplace discourse log that is the subject of this analysis. For their logs, all participating faculty members kept detailed records over the course of one week to identify the university activities in which they participated, leading one participant to observe, “I’ve always felt busy, but actually logging all my activities makes me look frantic.” Among the participants, some held promotable academic rank: for example, Bob (a non-tenure-line associate professor of environmental and radiological health sciences) and Felicity (an assistant professor on special non-tenure-line appointment in psychology). Others were instructors, such as Kiki (in history); Adam, Prudence, and Olsen (all in composition);

Figure 4. Sample work log page for one day in a contingent faculty member's life. "E" indicates email.

LOG and JOURNAL				
Date	Time	Communication Event/Work Activity	Artifact in Box?	Journal Entry: explanation, observation, comment
Monday	7:45	finish letter of rec.	X	R. Ross
	8:10	E Bank		↑
	8:15-8:50	prep for class,		i clicker Qs etc
	9-9:50	PSY260-in class		
	9:57	E Laura L		letter of rec
	10:01	E Kevin P		Brent for 3492
	10:07	E Tracy		student issue
	10:08	E TFs + UDX		meeting today
	10:15+	PPs for noon class		
	11:00	E Kevin P		scheduling + Brent
	11:40	E student		getting into 3492
	12:55	E Mark B		guest spot
	1:50	E Laurel/Mandy		wrtg. ctr. tutoring
	5:11	E Amanda		TA for 296?
	5:17	E Mark B		lecture content
5:25	E Evlwin		Ragan's death	
5:26	E Eric, Frank, Heather		" "	
5:28	E Matt		YChi speaker	
5:54	E Ava C		TA position - Spg	
6:50	E Craig		PSY100 research request	
6:55	E Casey E		492 regist.	
7:15	prepping - ADHD + Autism lecture			

Noon - 12:50 in class (PSY100)
 2-3 office hours
 3-4, PSY100 Team Mtg. - UDL training
 4-5 clinical supervision with Tim Beecher (home)

and Gayle (in art). Indeed, even faculty rank became a subject of discussion, as participants discovered that some colleges offer opportunity in the form of faculty rank while others do not. A final category of participant was David, who held an at-will, "faculty-like" position as an administrative professional who manages operations, helps build curriculum, and provides administrative oversight for a highly successful

MBA program. Drawing on their workplace logs, we offer description and analysis of the various activities in which they participated (see figure 2), classifying these via traditional categories of faculty work.

THE TEACHING ACTIVITY

For the study group, teaching was by far the most commonly shared activity. In fact, all members of this study participated in behaviors that might be described as functions of the teaching mission, including classroom teaching; advising; development and implementation of instructional tools and technologies; communication with students; curriculum development and management; and professional development of graduate teaching assistants (GTAs). Contracted teaching loads of the participants varied, ranging from 0 percent to 100 percent of their workload distributions. For those whose job descriptions were primarily or completely focused on teaching, the positions often involved labor-intensive courses, such as the teaching of first-year composition. The magnitude of the teaching and grading responsibility in these cases made extramural activities difficult for contingent faculty to maintain, a factor that influenced their ability to offer other forms of service that would be valuable both to the university and to themselves. Olsen, for instance, who held a terminal degree and sought publication, observed, "I realized I couldn't teach four classes and keep writing." Others in the study reported similar frustration of their plans for professional development and for building a better professional future with advancement and recognition. They also lamented the lost productivity that these efforts might have generated on behalf of the university.

Most of the faculty in this study reported extensive contact with students, but lamented schedules that limited their opportunities for collegial contact with other faculty, especially those in tenure lines. Olsen, for example, documented just three verbal interactions with tenure-line faculty over the course of her work week. Other participants noted that when contact with those in tenure lines occurred, the experience was often frustrating. Kiki, for instance, an instructor of history who had a course load of five courses per semester, characterized her work as part of a "joint activity between the non-tenure-line faculty and the regular faculty, the department, the college, and the university that is both stimulated by and directed toward each other." Yet Kiki also reported that some tenure-line faculty seemed out of touch with the nature of her work. A tenure-line faculty member had lodged a complaint with Kiki's chair about the noise created by the line of students in the hallway during her office hours, which resulted in Kiki being moved to a less central location.

Kiki was contracted at 100 percent teaching and reported that one-third of her time was spent in the classroom, with the remainder of her day consisting of grading; written and oral communication with students; efforts involved with instructional

technology; and class preparation. Kiki's log documents that her communication with students in the form of email, telephone conversations, office hours, and writing letters of recommendation required an additional 28 percent of her work hours during the week she maintained the log. Kiki noted an "ebb and flow" in the types of activities in which she engaged. Olsen, an instructor of composition, literature, and creative writing, similarly was on a 100 percent teaching contract. She reported that her work week was dominated by the demands of teaching writing and critical thinking to classrooms full of non-majors while enjoying few opportunities for collegial relationship. Although similarly reflecting the varied demands of the teaching mission that Kiki reported, Olsen's efforts were directed toward conferencing with student writers and providing comments on student papers. During the data collection week, Olsen also devoted several hours to dealing with a complicated plagiarism case and, while she sent several dozen emails to students, she had only three interactions with tenure-line colleagues over the course of the week, a statistic that she noted with concern. Yet Olsen's pride in the important work she was doing was evident in how she described work that she called "subversive":

I spend most of my day teaching students the basic skills of academic or public discourse, and encouraging them to think rhetorically about writing assignments. The public argument portfolio is an excellent example from my log of these actions. In this portfolio, students transitioned from writing an argument for an academic argument to rethinking and revising that argument for a public audience. [. . .] For my freshman students, these actions are complex, involving decision making and critical thinking about audience and context that they may never have engaged in before.

However, Olsen also lamented that grading academic argument portfolios "takes me forever. On a good day, I spend 45 minutes on an argument portfolio, reviewing students' homework assignments and commenting in depth on the final draft." One gained a sense of the isolation of the position through Olsen's detailed work log. She observed that her teaching was utterly dependent on technology, in part because her office space was inadequate, forcing her to conduct office hours in the library. Regarding the material manifestations of her contingent lifestyle, she wrote,

My computer wouldn't turn on this morning because the AC adaptor quit working. I panicked, but was relieved to find out that Batteries Plus had the right charger . . . If I were a full timer this would be a conversation with IT.

Adam's log also suggested the volume of independent, or perhaps even isolated, work in which contingent faculty engage. Adam's log included examples of the detailed feedback he provided on collaborative presentations from a twentieth-century fiction class. This feedback included rough draft notes and a final graded copy of a student's paper. Each "feedback set" suggested the extensive effort Adam made to provide forward-looking and carefully prioritized commentary on student work,

suggesting the sustained effort of contingent faculty in working with lower-division students.

Although teaching was a passionate activity for Bob, an associate professor in the College of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences, he understood it as a “second cousin” to the funded research that was driving his college’s highly successful extramural research legacy. Tasked with doing much lower- and upper-division instruction in his department, as well as with advising several master’s theses, Bob reported receiving not-so-subtle hints from his tenured colleagues that, unlike him, they were required to secure their own funding. They implied that they were subsidizing Bob’s teaching, and Bob particularly recalled the day that a tenured professor patted him on the shoulder and said, “I remember when I thought teaching was important.”

In contrast, Gayle’s dual hats as both instructor and undergraduate advisor to the 600 undergraduates in art allowed her to maintain a different sort of relationship with tenure-line faculty in this department. The large group of advisees made it necessary for Gayle and tenure-line faculty to interact on a regular basis, and having been entrusted to understand the needs of each undergraduate in the department, Gayle had also become a valued resource. She has been invited to serve on the department’s undergraduate curriculum committee, and her relationship with tenure-line faculty has steadily deepened.

At the time of this study, 35 percent of undergraduate instruction in the local setting was being accomplished by faculty off the tenure track. Study participants observed the contradictions of this situation and documented it in their teaching logs: they were needed for the classroom even though their work was routinely diminished; they were teachers of record, yet for most, the material support for their work was limited; they sought professional development yet saw that funding for travel, especially given the fiscal constraints of the economic downturn, was often protected to support those in tenured lines; they were responsible for delivery of instruction, but often had little opportunity to discuss curriculum with tenure-line colleagues.

These contradictions suggest the difficult interdependence of multiple university activities and those participating in them. As definitions of tenure-line productivity have shifted within a tenure system that increasingly values funded research and other forms of scholarly and creative work more than teaching, the *instructional* mission has been redirected largely toward those off the tenure track. This phenomenon has resulted in the dependence of one faculty category or rank upon another in a complex social network not unlike the relationship between firetenders and hunter-gatherers described by Leontiev. However, within this well-established division of labor, contingent faculty are paid less, provided few if any protections, and offered a restricted set of tools with which to do their work. Functioning without institutional buy-in or, locally, a collective bargaining unit, the non-tenure-line faculty in our

study felt as constrained in their ability to argue for the value of their instruction as they felt vulnerable to criticism. In notable contradiction, however, the “firetending” teaching role also had become for them satisfying work that offered its own rewards.

It might be said that departmental and programmatic operations depend increasingly on discrete divisions of labor and specialized roles, of which non-tenure-line teaching faculty are part. Having a group of non-tenure-line faculty who shoulder the burden of teaching allows tenure-line faculty to focus on other department and programmatic activities, such as teaching capstone and graduate courses, directing theses, conducting research, and providing service to the university. Further, although advising remains a faculty responsibility in some locations, it is increasingly contracted to a sector of professional advisors, which suggests that the contingent faculty member is but one example of a general shift toward specialized workplace roles in university settings. Nationally, in fact, while the number of tenure-line faculty has increased over the past twenty years by just 17 percent, the number of senior administrators has increased by 101 percent; full-time non-faculty professionals by 281 percent; and full-time, non-tenure-line faculty by 214 percent (“Where Are the Priorities?” 16). The days of an all-purpose faculty seem to be behind us.

THE RESEARCH, SCHOLARSHIP, AND ARTISTRY ACTIVITY

Second only to teaching, many of the contingent faculty in this study engaged in research, artistry, and other forms of scholarly work, either as part of a negotiated workload distribution or as independent scholars staying current in their fields. Their workplace logs revealed, however, that they often received little or no recognition for this scholarship and were afforded virtually no time to carry it out. Bob noted that where research opportunities did exist, the research pecking order was firmly in place among faculty of all ranks, with those who obtained funding from major national grants, such as the National Institutes of Health or the National Science Foundation, gaining greater access to resources as a result of their research “success,” while those considered less “productive” were expected to teach more. Known widely as the differential workload distribution, this approach reinforced hierarchies, marginalized teaching, and made success difficult to achieve, even for those contingent faculty with a research component as part of their workload.

Nevertheless, the contingent faculty in this study understood that research, scholarship, and artistry often function as central measures of productivity in the research-intensive university. As a result of this awareness *and* of their own scholarly interests, several study participants were engaged in research/artistry even when not rewarded institutionally for that work. Even in the humanities, where every participant had a 100 percent teaching workload, many contingent faculty members—notably Adam, Olsen, Kiki, and Gayle—maintained an active research/artistry agenda.

They were aware, however, that they did so on their own time and essentially at their own risk. Adam's log captured this theme when he pointed out that he could account for 93 percent of a forty-hour work week, even as he acknowledged that there were "invisible" tasks such as conferring with students outside of office hours, often by email, and writing letters of recommendation, a task he found no way to document as part of his professional workload. However, he also documented the extracurricular work he was doing to position himself for the next step in his career, whether in the academic setting or outside of it:

In addition to my full-time teaching position, I run a small press [. . .] Although such work is in no way part of the duties assigned to me as a non-tenure-track faculty member, doing such extra work has been part of my strategy to obtain something like job security. As I was promoted from semester-to-semester contracts to annual contracts and finally to a multi-year contract, I came to realize that non-tenure-track faculty can never really secure their jobs in the current two-tier system of college instruction—at which point the extra work that I was doing all along becomes, I hope, credentials for a change in vocation.

For Gayle, who described her identity as equal parts college teacher and working artist, the issue was one of relevance. For Adam, it was a matter of obtaining recognition outside of the immediate academic setting because, as he put it, "recognition seems to be so difficult to achieve within it." Kiki stated that work on manuscripts for academic journals and a monograph formed a substantial part of her identity. After ten years of full-time teaching, Kiki no longer placed her hopes in a tenure-line position at this institution, but instead justified her research and publication efforts on the basis that "a participating member of her field ought to be a contributing part of the university culture." Like several others in this study, Kiki was functioning as an independent scholar.

In the sciences, Bob and Felicity separately reported taking the gamble that prioritizing their research would make them competitive for a tenure-line position within their departments. This gamble, at the end of the study, was paying off for Bob but not for Felicity. Bob was offered a promotion, a merit pay raise, and imminent conversion to a tenure-track position, reinforcing his stated belief that "in the university environment and culture, research represents the highest level of artistry, creativity and critical thinking." Felicity, meanwhile, was still conducting funded research and doing substantial amounts of teaching, noting, "There is no difference between what I do and what the tenured faculty do." However, Felicity was well aware of the differences in compensation and other forms of support that might be obtained if she were on the tenure track, so she persisted in her efforts.

In contrast, Prudence took exception to the idea of doing "tenure-like work" without the protections and rewards. She explained that her decision not to participate in unrewarded research and scholarship was a matter of conscience. Trained in

rhetoric and composition, Prudence argued that if she were to do what Felicity was doing, it would amount to doing uncompensated work: an act that, as she saw it, was ethically questionable and a dangerous precedent. She worried that doing such work would send the message that even without appropriate compensation, some non-tenure-line faculty will do all types of work and perform any service. Prudence said, “Engaging in research without guidelines and a job description that rewards research is problematic.”

Perhaps it is generally the case that contingent faculty are neither expected nor supported in their efforts to engage in scholarly and creative work. However, this study suggests that contingent faculty members engage in all forms of faculty activity anyway, although generally as an extracurricular activity. These findings should not surprise us when we consider that contingent faculty are involved in higher education and drawn to a life of the mind. In some cases, as with Prudence, they may elect not to participate in research activities, but even then, they make such decisions based on informed and critical grounds. Also, when contingent faculty do engage in scholarly or creative work, it must still be said that other activity systems, such as the tenure system, generally work at cross purposes to their efforts.

THE SERVICE ACTIVITY

Although often not recognized as a rewarded component of the contingent faculty workload, service and outreach were important activities for several of the contingent faculty members in this study. Many reported systematic participation in faculty governance, often as a form of activism and in recognition that “a seat at the table” translates into voice, representation, and recognition. Felicity described service as “forging relationships that are crucial to the survival of the organization as a vital community resource.” However, an awareness of the essentially unrewarded nature of this work bred frustration among some of the contingent faculty. In contrast, those whose service was an acknowledged part of the workload reported less frustration, even though the service percentage was mostly symbolic, translating into no appreciable reduction in other responsibilities.

Many of the non-tenure-line faculty in this study reported participation in faculty governance. But their involvement often seemed spurred by a kind of tokenism, their roles limited to being a sole representative on department committees or to serving on segregated contingent-only committees. These roles generally had limited reporting, voting, or advisory relations to larger governance bodies. Lacking voting rights and equitable representation in established governance entities, contingent faculty understandably reported being reluctant to serve. Prudence and Bob were exceptions, having successfully accomplished substantial shifts to governance mechanisms within their units. Bob’s dean had created a college committee for non-tenure-line faculty

to communicate issues directly to him. This Special Faculty Advisory Committee represented the interests of nearly one-third of the college faculty. It campaigned for multi-year contracts, bridge support for research faculty, formal job descriptions, mentorship programs, and promotion and hiring opportunities; and developed a contingent faculty handbook for the college. Prudence obtained standing committee status for a representative contingent faculty group in her department as well as a revision to the annual evaluation instrument. Their efforts established precedents for creating college committees across the campus; a cross-ranks Contingent Faculty Caucus; and an amendment to the faculty manual that allowed for a non-tenure-line advisory committee to the faculty council—a move they hoped would lead to voting rights down the road (see figure 2).

Outreach, a central function of the land-grant public institution, was another activity in which many contingent faculty members participated despite their contributions' seldom being recognized. Kiki's log conveyed her participation in community outreach through assistance to primary and secondary students' history projects. Additionally, Kiki's log reported her volunteering to judge Colorado History Day in the public schools. Reflectively, she reported that she participates in the grading of Advanced Placement history exams, where she is acknowledged as a subject-area expert.

Gayle reported in her log that she was working on a \$10,000 competitively awarded grant that she had won for work on an art-across-the-curriculum project linking public school teachers with a local museum. This outreach effort not only represented a unique professional development opportunity for the teachers, but also provided an outreach opportunity for two tenure-line faculty members. However, because Gayle's workload distribution did not include outreach, her success with this funded grant was recognized neither in her annual review nor even in the department newsletter. Interestingly, the latter slight was especially hurtful to Gayle because it would have been such a simple recognition that conveyed her membership in the department community.

As Gayle's example suggests, institutional recognition of service and outreach efforts by contingent faculty is often negligible. Moreover, this involvement is challenged by many of the same forces already discussed. Non-tenure-line faculty members generally understand that their service and outreach are undervalued until or unless these efforts are codified and documented as part of a workload distribution or formal job description. The result is an apparent contradiction: they record their service and outreach on annual evaluation forms that as yet provide no space for such activities. They are thus challenging activity systems to adjust. Also, as the contingent faculty members in this study articulated, a failure to participate in service, particularly as it relates to governance, results in an abdication of the right to representation. Similarly, a failure to document that service results in the absence of

an official record. Bob clarified the importance of these acts, pointing to documented committee work as the essential mechanism for educating tenure-line faculty and administrators about contingent faculty capability. Quite literally, Bob, like many others, was inscribing his professional identity upon the institution.

THE ADMINISTRATION ACTIVITY

As the participants in this study point out, defining those activities that might be deemed “administration” presents a degree of challenge, especially (again) for those faculty whose jobs are defined as 100 percent teaching. Although the university’s faculty code places “participation in administrative activities” under “University Service,” it seems important to distinguish the administrative roles that several among the study group performed. Such activities are sometimes supported through “administrative course releases,” by which these faculty members are relieved of some teaching responsibilities in exchange for performing administrative work.

Adam, for example, served as one of three “administrative lecturers” in the University Composition Program. Each position carried a three-course teaching load with a one-course release for supervising GTAs. Adam’s GTA supervisory responsibilities were numerous: for example, coauthorship of the annually revised first-year composition syllabus; planning and delivery of a weeklong preservice orientation; observing and writing reports on GTA teaching and grading; contributing to weekly professional development sessions; and curriculum planning meetings with tenure-line rhetoric and composition faculty. Indeed, a review of Adam’s log revealed that fully 50 percent of his time was dedicated to GTA supervision and program administration, despite the fact that this role represented just 25 percent of his workload distribution. Given that Adam had already described his teaching responsibilities as taking at least 93 percent of a forty-hour work week, it became clear that this week for him actually exceeded seventy hours. Similarly, Prudence’s service as associate director of both the writing center and the writing-across-the-curriculum program purchased her release from 75 percent of a normal teaching load, but her multiple roles were complex and fragmenting.

Although administrative responsibilities can present contingent faculty with valuable experience—offering opportunities for professional development and for increased levels of visibility and influence—the activity systems of our universities are relatively unprepared to support contingent faculty administrators. Rather, when contingent faculty members serve as program administrators or assistant administrators, they become the frugal department’s logical alternative to expensive tenure-line positions. Prudence’s and Adam’s logs, for example, convey that they maintain and teach curricula for the composition program; plan, coordinate, and design pedagogy seminars for GTAs; mentor, supervise, and evaluate GTAs; and help administer the

writing center and writing-across-the-curriculum program. Yet administrative roles such as these represent a form of work that not even tenure-line faculty are fully recognized for, as the Writing Program Administrators (WPA) national organization has pointed out, saying faculty administrators often “find themselves in untenable job situations” (Hult 89). Although none of the non-tenure-line writing faculty in this study had full writing program responsibility, both Adam and Prudence had levels of administrative responsibilities that remind us of the greater vulnerability and lesser influence of untenured program administrators. As Laura Micciche suggests, “WPAs daily find themselves immersed in anger, frustration, and disappointment” (156) that results from “departments that fail to acknowledge the intellectual work required to develop curricula, syllabi, and teacher-training courses” (158). Given the contradiction noted among tenured administrators—in which there is little understanding about how to document, much less reward, such work—how much more complicated must it be for the untenured in such positions? It remains a mystery, for instance, how contingent faculty administrative roles are to be understood, recognized, and rewarded when this inadequately supported work is further marginalized by low pay, absence of job security, and minimal institutional authority. Additionally, the administrative work of non-tenure-line administrators is often situated within a complex reporting cycle that benefits tenure-line faculty directly for the ultimate responsibility they hold for program success, while failing to offer any similar reward to the contingent administrator. How are contingent faculty administrative roles to be understood if they mainly serve the promotion cases of others?

An alternative might be suggested by David’s work as a full-time administrative professional in the university’s MBA program. David’s category of employment is described by university officials as “faculty-like” and offers an alternative approach to the administrative conundrum. His job description and workload distribution codify his role, authorizing him to undertake responsibilities normally reserved for tenured faculty, from fine-tuning curriculum to the nuts and bolts of scheduling classes. With full access to university resources and senior faculty in his program, David focuses on these activities and brings a high level of professionalism to them, which in turn relieves the tenured program director and other faculty. David’s position is entirely focused on program administration. His work log reflects his recruiting, admitting, registering, and advising of (graduate) students as well as his role in making faculty hires and in providing classroom support for their teaching. Asked about these efforts, David said he views his role as one of facilitation—as “ultimately to relieve our students from as much administrative burden as possible, so that they can concentrate more of their energy and efforts on their academic work, as well as to provide similar support to our instructors.” A professional class of “faculty-like” administrators such as David is also able to promote highly visible programs that contribute to university bottom lines and help offset diminishing public investment.

Although the popular notion is that the rising numbers of non-faculty professional ranks are a drain on university systems, perhaps they successfully accomplish what they set out to do: keep functions running while liberating faculty for other activities such as teaching, research, and service.

A DISCUSSION OF WORK LOGS IN LIGHT OF ACTIVITY THEORY

The work logs of the participants in this study document the integral roles that contingent faculty play in university life, demonstrating that their effort and output can be seen as inextricably connected to the activities of tenure-line faculty. Their roles contribute to evolving university systems that are far more complex than they were forty years ago, before the comprehensive withdrawal of public support to higher education. Although efforts to improve the status and working conditions of contingent faculty have been hampered by the recent economic downturn, our analysis suggests that an understanding of the nested and overlapping activity systems within which contingent faculty members work can allow us to take a more optimistic view of the future, one that offers contingent faculty enhanced access to the opportunity structures of our colleges and universities.

Our study participants valued their flexibility and adaptability as much as the university did. They did not, however, appreciate—nor does the university’s teaching system benefit from—a sense that *flexibility* translates roughly into *expendability*. Adam concluded, for example, that, barring the development of a professional advancement system, his best course of action was to look for work in another field. Every time a contingent faculty member reaches this conclusion, the university’s teaching system loses—and has to replace—a competent and well-trained professional. The result is a constant and wasteful turnover that ultimately undermines the university’s goal of supporting student learning.

Further, despite occupying ad hoc positions, contingent faculty increasingly participate in virtually all aspects of faculty work, though especially as a professional class of college teachers. Contingent faculty also continue to report that they attach deep meaning to their work activities, illustrating the precise labor transformation that Leontiev referred to when describing both the prehistoric firetender and the modern-day student who begins reading for the assignment but completes the book due to investment and enjoyment. The work itself, we can now say, while undeniably connected to meeting larger social needs, is also rewarding in and of itself. Gayle put this fact well, observing, “Although there is no professional incentive or reward for these activities, I need to do this because I am a professional educator, and that’s what professional educators do.”

This observation should not be used as justification for keeping pay low or for instrumentalizing non-tenure-line labor into widget-like work. Rather, it calls for

changes in our institutions that address the lack of support for the wide range of professional activities undertaken by non-tenure-line faculty members that undeniably support and enhance university systems. In other words, activities by non-tenure-line faculty members are troubling *not* because these faculty members choose to participate in them, but because colleges and universities take advantage of the uniquely human capacity to derive satisfaction from the mere fact of functioning as a professional: that is, to turn firefighting into valued labor, the assigned book into the enjoyed book. Failures of institutional support point toward a central fissure in the academy's understanding of the intrinsic rewards of teaching, in particular, and the now essential role of contingent faculty to its teaching mission, as well as the mutual dependence of one faculty type upon another. This miscalculation is only exacerbated by the increasing scarcity of resources in higher education, which seems to pit one faculty rank against another.

We contend that the case to a skeptical public can best be made through a cross-ranks, cross-disciplinary organization of faculty working to educate people about the contributions made by higher education to the quality of the larger social fabric. To accomplish this effort, we would need to stabilize and constructively structure non-tenure-line faculty roles and job descriptions; renegotiate the terms of labor for all faculty types; fairly dispense professional development opportunities; and create cross-rank faculty collaborations in designing curricula and in setting program goals. It is time to compromise: time to address the false binary that suggests that one must consider tenure-line positions or be prepared to throw tenure out. It should be possible, through a full assessment of university activities, to generate a new model for higher education that protects most aspects of the tenure system while also codifying and protecting the terms of work of non-tenure-line faculty once and for all, making official what we know or suspect: that non-tenure-line faculty are here to stay, and that essential features of their work, such as the right to grievance and the right to academic freedom, must be codified.

CONCLUSIONS

No group of faculty, whether on or off the tenure track, functions uniformly, interprets contexts identically, or focuses on consistent goals and purposes. Non-tenure-line faculty, as this study's participants suggest, can hardly be described as the long suffering who are unable to look out for their own interests or value opportunities for professional growth and career success. Rather, the aspirations and motivations of contingent faculty are varied, just as they are for tenure-line faculty. A recognition of these differences can lead to healthy discussion of contradictions, which Engeström argues can lead to changes in existing activity systems. Consider, for instance, the possibility of shifts to tenure and promotion that become possible

when one contemplates a “tenure-light” policy like that followed by some institutions in the University of California system. Here, at an agreed-upon time, teaching faculty prepare a promotion and tenure file that relates directly to their job description and workload distribution. Peers from around the country judge the file, just as they would a tenure file for a faculty member in a tenure-line position. Long-term employment then becomes justified and the norm rather than the exception. To support this effort, the contingent faculty member can be urged to “work to the job description and document excellence,” as Bob’s dean once advised him to do. Such documentation might include data from work/activity logs like those used in this study. In turn, departments might use logs as mechanisms for programmatic calibration of the labor of contingent faculty.

Further, new efforts to theorize contingent faculty issues should be directed toward creating new circumstances rather than simply offering new critiques of existing conditions. These efforts might even revise the very terms associated with those off the tenure track, such as *contingent*, *at-will*, *part-time*, and *limited contract*, replacing them with terms already in use in limited locations, which signal an improved kind of relationship: terms such as “professor of practice” (Duke; MIT; Pennsylvania State University). New relationships signaled by such terms would go some distance toward healing relationships between faculty and university systems, for although faculty working in contingent appointments are often reminded that their personal livelihoods are dependent on staying in the university’s good graces, it is equally true that the university is dependent on staying in the good graces of an interconnected faculty. In fact, it might be argued that a likely consequence of the sustained disenfranchisement of a large segment of a highly educated and determined faculty is an alignment of academic workers across rank and discipline. And although seismic shifts in public investment have led to the durable strategy of flex-staffing the majority of the faculty, even durable strategies are subject to change. A determined and unified faculty with an objective of saving the university while also saving jobs can rewrite policy, inscribe new practices, forge new and ethical traditions, and acknowledge the mutual dependence of one faculty group on another.

As suggested earlier in this article, even the work of individuals and groups who seek to improve working conditions for contingent faculty can be understood as constituting an activity system that is open to change. In this project, we have collaborated in a cross-ranks, cross-disciplinary effort, even though our paths as university employees seldom cross. Our roles as teachers, researchers, and administrators cause us to consider different features of the academic setting. Yet for this project, we deliberately positioned ourselves as colleagues engaged together in addressing inequities in university systems. Because participant-observer research always hopes to offer reciprocal benefit, we end here by saying that through this project we have gained an enhanced understanding of one another and of our mutual stake in the

enterprise of higher education. We have looked for solutions rather than simply offering critique, and in doing so we have reconsidered some of our initial positions. Our work has helped us to value the different and overlapping contributions we each make to the education of our students and understand how we might work to bring about a more equitable workplace.

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