Taking the Leap

By Janet Casey

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Virtually every professional organization committed to addressing the academy's dependence on contingent academic labor presumes that tenure-line faculty must take an active role in this cause. As Steve Street wrote in 2008 in an essay on contingent faculty rights: "It's you, the tenured and tenure track faculty, who can effect ... change. Adjuncts need you to, just as you have needed and will continue to need us. We need not just your expressions of empathy but your help in bringing us in — your votes on budget issues that can get us equitable pay, benefits, and job security — because you ... have the institutional power."

Unfortunately, most contingent faculty rights advocates would acknowledge that engaging permanent faculty in meaningful ways has been difficult. What follows are some thoughts on this impasse, and on what might be required of tenure-line faculty as we join our contingent colleagues in facing the uncertain future of higher education.

We all know, in theory at least, that it makes little sense for tenure-track (TT) faculty to stick their heads in the sand concerning this issue; by any reckoning, most faculty members nationally are now off the tenure track, making those of us with tenure lines less relevant, less central, with each passing year. The New Faculty Majority, a national advocacy organization for non-tenure-track (NTT) faculty launched in 2009, was named with precisely this trend in mind. The status of tenure is eroding, not gradually but precipitously, as the sheer numbers of non-tenure-track faculty engulf the remaining dinosaurs of the old higher education landscape. If we care about tenure, so the argument goes, then we can't afford not to concern ourselves with the deteriorating state of the faculty labor system. The balance of power will tip, the tenure-line faculty members will find themselves marginal to the enterprise of higher education on a national scale (as has already happened in some cases on the institutional level), and it will be far too late to reclaim what is lost.

We can hardly fail to hear this message; after all, it is repeated frequently, in increasingly insistent tones. Yet it is the atypical TT faculty member who has consciously and actively worked for change, or even educated himself or herself about faculty labor institutionally or nationally. Various reasons for this indifference have been advanced, many focusing on the perceived insularity or even arrogance of the TT faculty body. Name-calling, however, is far too easy, and in most cases it misses the mark. I believe that the failure of most TT faculty members to attend seriously to NTT issues has far less to do with self-absorption than with a tendency to see contingent labor use/abuse as merely an employment (i.e., market economics) issue rather than a problem framed by questions of social justice and academic freedom. Viewing contingency hiring purely as a market issue, of course, allows us to dismiss it as something largely beyond our control; viewing it in reference to social justice and academic freedom, however, makes it continuous with earlier struggles in the academy, and suggests that the problem must be resolved by those within the system.

If social justice is about equal access and the equitable distribution of advantages and benefits, then there is little doubt that maintaining an undercompensated subsidiary workforce whose members have fewer rights and perquisites than their TT colleagues constitutes an instance of social injustice. On the most basic level, it is simply inappropriate that some people with the same credentials as TT faculty are being offered less secure jobs and less pay but are expected to do the same kinds of work. And for those NTT faculty members who lack certain credentials (a Ph.D., perhaps, or an active research agenda), fair compensatory arrangements in line with their qualifications, offering reasonable job security and suitably circumscribed job responsibilities, are far from the norm.

It seems essential to mention here that widespread NTT hiring has yet to be rationalized convincingly on pedagogical grounds — even if we concede that such hiring can sometimes appear to benefit students by enabling institutional flexibility to meet their evolving curricular demands. The resulting lack of consistency in course offerings, advising and mentoring opportunities, and general faculty presence, however, surely compromises whatever flexibility is gained; moreover, an under-recognized faculty workforce is never to the advantage of students, whose learning conditions are directly tied to faculty working conditions. To be sure, the immediately compelling motivation for extensive NTT hiring is not pedagogical but simply economic; if the economic incentive were eliminated, institutions would be far less likely to pursue such hiring, and would presumably do so only in limited contexts. It falls to us as TT faculty, then, to invest our energies in more reflective hiring practices and compensation policies that will both advance our educational goals and build an equitable community of colleagues.

Without arguing for the precise forms that equity might take (should we compensate NTT faculty on a pro rata basis? sustain a range of faculty contracts denoting varied job responsibilities? eliminate tenure?), it seems valid to expect TT faculty to interest themselves in these issues, especially on their own campuses. For one thing, we have an obligation to our colleagues — and I use that term in its widest possible sense. Genuine collegiality means more than friendliness in the hallways; at its best, it includes an active interest in the professional development of those who share our pedagogical and disciplinary interests. Back in 1979, David Malone argued that faculty development as a concept should be of primary concern for all of us, positing the *Bildung* genre as the proper model for faculty life. In 2001, Richard Moser of the American Association of University Professors, argued that participating in efforts to address the inequities of NTT employment is central to what he termed "academic citizenship." It is time that these exhortations were taken seriously. Who are we as educators if we concern ourselves with the development of our students but turn a blind eye to the career paths of substantial numbers of our colleagues? And what are students to think about our paeans to social justice when they discover that we don't take care of our own?

But attending to NTT issues also makes sense in the context of our professed goals and preoccupations. For one thing, battles over inclusivity are hardly unmapped terrain for us. The late decades of the 20th century saw an unprecedented agitation in the academy for attention to marginalized groups of all kinds; the results included dramatic changes both in the overall makeup of the faculty and in the shape and range of the curriculum. Especially puzzling, then, is the lack of perceived continuity between the philosophical perspectives that launched, say, feminism and multiculturalism and those that now underpin contingent activism. After all, one might expect those who once fought vigorously for representation — on the faculty, in the curriculum,

and in published scholarship — to feel a sense of connection to what is now a beleaguered majority of higher education faculty, especially in the humanities, who are systematically denied a full place at the academic table. As with the canon wars of recent generations of humanities scholars, the nature of faculty labor is pivotal to our current understanding of our roles as teachers and intellectuals — and yes, to our expressed commitment to inclusivity. To perpetuate the current system's inequities, actively or passively, is to sanction an elitism that we have rejected in our modes and objects of study. It suggests, indeed, that we care more about texts than about people.

We need to recognize that the presence of large numbers of faculty members with insecure appointments and uneven opportunities for fair assessment severely constrains the sense of curricular and scholarly capaciousness that is the legacy of late 20th-century academic progressivism. This is because faculty members without reasonable job security represent collectively a blow to one of our core values: academic freedom. NTT faculty — the majority of higher education faculty in the U.S. — simply do not, for the most part, have it. They literally cannot afford to speak their minds on the departmental or institutional levels, nor is it difficult to see why they might legitimately dread student evaluations. They are forced to curry the favor of colleagues as well as students, potentially limiting their effectiveness as teachers and contributing to grade inflation. Most important, however, is that they cannot pursue their intellectual interests as vigorously as our professional code would suggest is best for all concerned — the teachers themselves, their colleagues, and their students. The free exchange of ideas among intellectuals is little more than an illusion when many faculty members operate daily under the threat of censorship.

The loss is ours as much as theirs. And it is most certainly a loss for our students.

What are we to do? The answers will most likely be complicated, inflected by local circumstances, and not conducive to easy formulae. But the most basic need is for involvement, particularly of TT faculty. NTT faculty have already begun to organize effectively, and their numbers are growing; we want to be with them, not against them, and most certainly not external to the conversation. To be sure, other constituencies, including administrators and even the general public, also bear obligations in regard to this issue, and NTT faculty themselves must consider seriously their own complicity in a system that is not to their advantage, as has been noted recently in the blogosphere and elsewhere. But TT faculty must take a leadership role in recalibrating the faculty labor system. We still retain substantial influence in local, regional, and national higher education contexts, and we have much at stake if this problem is not resolved.

Leading the charge, however, will not come without costs. There is little question that ensuring reasonable job security and hence academic freedom for more faculty members will be expensive. The sticking point, then, is how to pay for it, especially within the constraints of the current economic climate. And perhaps this is where the rubber hits the road, so to speak. It is not that money is unavailable for such an undertaking; it is that most institutions have declined to prioritize it. In short, money will have to be reallocated from other pots, other projects — and TT faculty will inevitably have to give something up. All the hand-wringing in the world will not compensate for the genuine material sacrifices — of dollars or of pet projects — that TT faculty must make in order to create a faculty labor system that is more ethical and more genuinely reflective of our stated goals and priorities.

Of course, to remain passive is also to give something up — namely, our voice. Until we acknowledge this we will continue to flounder, making vague noises of discontent while avoiding the messy work of fixing what is broken. Yet there is an alternative, and it lies in action:

Educate yourself. Know the faculty labor statistics, institutionally as well as nationally. Investigate the relevant website materials offered by the Modern Language Association, the AAUP, the American Federation of Teachers and the Canadian Association of University Teachers. Read one (or more) of the many recent books that address the contingent labor issue. Familiarize yourself with the agenda of the New Faculty Majority.

Commit to exploring change. Look down the road and imagine the faculty labor arrangements you would like to see 5, 10, or 15 years from now. Be a part of your institution's necessary evolution.

Be a genuine colleague. Interest yourself in the professional development of all faculty members, and take the idea of academic citizenship seriously. It is more difficult to ignore the circumstances of those you know on a personal level.

Prepare to make sacrifices. Consider the possibility that you, or your department or institution more generally, may have to forfeit something tangible in order to advance the cause of building a fair faculty for all. This is not to say that we should stop agitating for increased resources for higher education; it is merely to acknowledge that the professionalization of NTT faculty cannot wait.

The ab/use of NTT faculty labor is a major academic issue of our time, and it is becoming increasingly awkward to stand by and fail to engage in it — or worse, to harbor uninformed opinions about it. The responsibility to fix the system belongs to all of us, but the role of TT faculty — especially those with tenure — in leading exploratory initiatives is, at this juncture, absolutely essential. To refuse to take on this charge is to compromise the claims of expansiveness and inclusivity on which we have staked our professional lives. Our integrity as both teachers and intellectuals is linked, most decidedly, to our willing participation in the conversation.

Author's Bio

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