

# Precarious Lives

by MICHAEL BÉRUBÉ | Pennsylvania State University | mfb12@psu.edu

The facts of our situation are not in dispute: contingent faculty members now make up over one million of the 1.5 million people teaching in American colleges and universities—about 70 percent of all faculty. Many of them are working at or under the poverty line, with an average salary of about \$2,700 per course and without health insurance; some of them, as the *Chronicle of Higher Education* reported in 2012, are living on food stamps (Patton). They have no academic freedom worthy of the name, because they can be fired at will; and, when fired, many remain ineligible for unemployment benefits, because institutions routinely invoke the “reasonable assurance of continued employment” clause in federal unemployment law even for faculty members on yearly contracts who have no reasonable assurance of anything.

In 1970, the numbers were reversed: more than 70 percent of college professors had tenure. Since then, ever-increasing numbers of students have been taught by an ever-decreasing number of tenured faculty. That is the real story of the relation between student enrollments and faculty jobs, and the details are staggering. In 1947 there were 2.3 million undergraduates enrolled in American colleges and universities. In 1972, that number was 9.2 million. That 25-year period after World War II is widely understood as an unprecedented boom, demographically and economically, followed by years of retrenchment and stagnant waves. But on campus, the boom just kept booming—to the point at which enrollments broke the 20-million mark in 2009 and have remained there in the years since. And yet that continued growth in undergraduate enrollment has not been met with a commensurate investment in higher education—on the contrary. State legislatures have drastically reduced

support for their colleges and universities, offloading the costs onto students and their families and redefining higher education as a private investment rather than a public good. In the University of California system, for example, in-state tuition was \$300 as late as the year 1980 (for out-of-state students it was a whopping \$360). Today, it is over \$11,000. This is nothing less than an intergenerational betrayal: the people whose educations were subsidized in the 1960s and 1970s, the boomers of the boom years, graduated, became taxpayers, lobbyists, and legislators, and decided not to fund the system from which they benefited so dramatically.

It is routinely asserted that the current state of affairs for academic job seekers results from an overproduction of PhDs. Like the claim about declining undergraduate enrollments in the humanities, this claim is usually presented as self-evident and is followed with some loose talk about “supply” and “demand.” And like the claim about undergraduate enrollments, it is very wrong (Bérubé 2013). As Marc Bousquet has been arguing for years, the faculty workforce is made up of hundreds of thousands of people who do not have doctoral degrees—which, I would add, effectively calls into question the function of the PhD as the degree that grants credentials for college teaching (Bousquet 2008). The National Study of Postsecondary Faculty was last conducted in 2004, but as of then, 65.2 percent of non-tenure-track faculty members held the MA as their highest degree—57.3 percent in four-year institutions and 76.2 percent in two-year institutions (Laurence 2013). There is no reason to think that those percentages have gone down in the past decade and every indication that they have risen. To wit, there are many factors affecting the working conditions of

adjuncts, but the production of PhDs isn’t one of the major ones.

These numbers have implications that go far beyond the usual debates about the size of doctoral programs, because they illustrate how inadequate it is to think that we can solve the problem of contingent faculty simply by advocating that everyone be converted to the tenure track. Precisely because adjuncts are so invisible, even to the tenured colleagues they work among, it is not widely understood that many of them have held their jobs—at one institution or at many, on a year-by-year basis or on multiyear contracts—for ten, fifteen, twenty years or more. (Indeed, one of the most heartbreaking stories about adjuncts in the past few years involved one Margaret Mary Vojtko, who died destitute at 83, having lost her \$2,556-per-course adjunct job after teaching at Duquesne University for 25 years. She received no severance pay, no pension, *nada*.) Uninformed people—and this group includes many elected officials and higher-ed lobbyists, alas—tend to speak of contingent faculty in two ways: either as bright, energetic 30-year-olds who enliven their departments and disciplines, working in the trenches for a few years before getting their first tenure-track job, or as professionals with day jobs in other lines of work who agree to teach a course at a local university for pin money. That part-time, informal arrangement for people who have other sources of income (be they actors, entrepreneurs, tinkers, or tailors) is the original function of adjunct faculty and offers the only legitimate rationale for paying a college teacher less than \$7,000 for a college course; the Modern Language Association recommendation is for a minimum of \$7,230 for a standard three-credit course, and for a teaching schedule of six courses per year—for a very modest annual salary of \$43,380.

The situation is complicated still further by the terms of art by which institutions designate contingent faculty. They can be called “instructors” or “lecturers” or “visiting assistant professors” or “professors of the practice”—or pretty much anything. There is no universally agreed-upon designation for contingent faculty; there are even contingent faculty who do not want to be designated by the term “contingent faculty.” Moreover, there is no correspondence between a contingent faculty member’s title and his or her rank or degree of job security. As a result, some contingent faculty are effectively long-term, full-time, non-tenure-track faculty working on multiyear contracts for decades; some are hired on an annual basis by one institution, year after year (until they are summarily let go); still others, informally known as “freeway flyers,” cobble together an existence by teaching at two or more different institutions in an area—a course or two here, a course or two there. This is by far the most precarious form of academic employment, though it must be said that all contingent faculty are in a sense “precarious,” in the sense that they can be fired for any reason or for none, and all are subject to the fluctuating employment needs of their departments—which means, in many cases, that they are not informed about what they will be teaching or (even worse) not informed that they will not be teaching at all until mere weeks before the start of classes.

In English departments, the most precarious faculty tend to be found in introductory writing courses—a state of affairs that intensifies divisions between faculty teaching literature and faculty teaching rhetoric and composition (not to mention the divisions between the tenured directors of writing programs and their precarious employees). In the languages, the most precarious faculty tend to be

found in introductory language-learning classes, heightening once more the divisions between those faculty members and the tenured scholars of literature. As one member of the MLA Executive Council put it during my time as an officer (and I paraphrase), it is all well and good to decry the exploitation of adjuncts; but no one is going to rally around a program of action that merely alleviates that exploitation somewhat while keeping the full professors stocked with eight-student graduate seminars in *Don Quixote*.

The question before the profession, then, is nothing less than the question of how to reverse the deprofessionalization of the professoriate. That process has been under way for over 40 years now, but there is nothing inexorable or inevitable about it; there is nothing to be gained by blaming our own personnel decisions on large-scale forces far beyond our control (capitalism, or more specifically, neoliberalism), and everything to be gained—for contingent and tenured faculty alike—by implementing reforms, college by college and department by department, that will increase job security for precarious faculty. Some might benefit most from increased pay and multiyear contracts; others might be eligible, or be made eligible, for a route to teaching-intensive tenured positions. As Jennifer Ruth and I argue in our forthcoming book *This Is Not the Crisis You’re Looking For: The State of the Humanities and the Erosion of Higher Education* (New York: Palgrave Pivot).

or in any other fields, and everything to do with the overproduction of deans and department heads willing to issue those contracts. The contingent faculty signing those contracts, of course, live in fear of the possibility that their next term of employment will be their last—because of budgets, because of a vicious student evaluation, because of an irate phone call, or just because. Only when we begin to argue—only when we begin to *believe*—that academic freedom ultimately serves the public good, and that academic freedom requires a reasonable measure of job security, will we be able to establish professional standards of employment for our precarious colleagues.

#### References

Bérubé, Michael

2013 “The Humanities, Declining? Not According to the Numbers.” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 1, 2013. <http://chronicle.com/article/The-Humanities-Declining-Not/140093/>.

Bérubé, Michael, and Jennifer Ruth

forthcoming *This Is Not the Crisis You’re Looking For: The State of the Humanities and the Erosion of Higher Education* (New York: Palgrave Pivot).

Bousquet, Marc

2008 *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation*. New York: New York University Press.

Laurence, David

2013 “A Profile of the Non-Tenure-Track Academic Workforce.” *ADE (Association of Departments of English) Bulletin*, no. 153: 6–22.

Patton, Stacey

2012 “The Ph.D. Now Comes with Food Stamps.” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 6, 2012. <http://chronicle.com/article/From-Graduate-School-to/131795/>. ■