

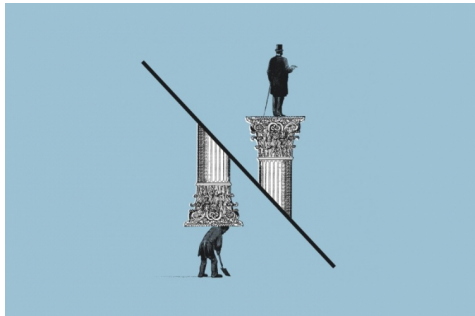


THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

When 'Academic Solidarity' Is Sophistry

Are elite, tenured professors fighting for adjuncts, or for maintaining their own privileges?

By Zena Hitz | JUNE 29, 2020



Justin Renteria for The Chronicle

In a shipwreck or a house fire, one may have a moment to look around to see what is worth saving, to clutch something precious before jumping on the lifeboat or braving the fireman's ladder. In higher education, we are in such a moment now. What shall we save? What shall we leave for lost? In short, what is fundamental to a university?

Prominent faculty members have responded:

Whatever the murky future holds, contingent faculty ought to be included in it. More than 3,000 professors have now signed an “academic solidarity statement” in support of contingent faculty. The signatories, who include Judith Butler, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Greg Grandin, Naomi Klein, and Dani Rodrik, vow not to “accept invitations for speaking engagements, workshops, and conferences” at institutions that fail to protect their contingent colleagues.

This threat not to attend events in the next academic year (and to “reassess pending future developments”) shows how weak the commitment really is — almost all such events are likely to be canceled by quarantine. But the failure in solidarity shown by these professors runs deeper.

The petition lauds an apparently philanthropic move from some administrators to postpone tenure decisions. Yet such a move invites a cynical interpretation: Administrators may well prefer to read next year's balance sheets before tenuring more professors. The petition itself is open to a similar cynical interpretation.

Tenured faculty know that their high salaries, low teaching loads, and generous research support rely on a vast bank of contingent faculty to keep spending on instruction in check. That relationship is revealed by the low cost of research leave (only one adjunct salary away), as well as by the wildly unequal distribution of teaching responsibilities. Fighting for the jobs of contingent faculty is an indirect way to defend one's own luxurious working conditions, by continuing the exploitation that makes them possible.

This is not to condemn the moral character of tenure-line faculty at research universities. The incentives they face make good choices extremely difficult. When Portland State's Jennifer Ruth tried to reduce her department's reliance on adjuncts, she was struck by a

“lack of collective will” and a “compromised culture.” Indeed, the hostility of her colleagues led her to switch departments. It is one thing to support the adjunct faculty when the costs come from a distant and invisible source like “the state” or “the administration.” It is another to undertake personal sacrifice to build more just and equitable communities.

It will require personal sacrifice to correct the vast inequities in compensation at universities. In my home state of Maryland, the list of highest earning state employees is topped by university coaches and medical-school professors paid nearly a million dollars in base salary. To reach the salary of our chief public servant, the governor, at a humble \$179,000, one has to scroll through page upon page of university employees.

At many R1 departments, tenure-line faculty members make four to five times the salary of their contingent colleagues, before benefits. Some of them, the truly elite, are showered with research money, research leave, and course releases for the tiniest bit of administrative work.

The days of the prestige researcher who jets in from Europe for a few months and six figures should come to a swift and decisive end.

As some tenured faculty members have turned up the volume about the treatment of adjuncts, they have also continued to lobby effectively to reduce their own teaching burdens. Teaching loads at elite R1 departments have shrunk, from a typical load of three per semester in the 1960s, to 2/2 or 2/1 today. Faculty members at top liberal-arts colleges like Scripps, Vassar,

Barnard, and Colgate have mimicked this R1 trend, taking steps to reduce their teaching loads in the last 10 years.

The priority of tenured professors at such institutions is clear: unencumbered research. In light of such priorities and privilege, we must not settle for empty gestures while ignoring our personal investment in the status quo. The overemphasis on research is a direct obstacle to the change universities need. To reshape a university to meet basic standards of equity and justice, we must put teaching ahead of research. Let me explain why.

I left research academe to teach at St. John’s College five years ago, after scholarly training at the University of Chicago and Princeton and teaching for seven years at Auburn and the University of Maryland-Baltimore County. At that time I had begun to feel disconnected from my research and, worse, I began to have doubts about the broad value of my teaching for my students.

I expected small liberal-arts college teaching to be more fulfilling, but I was not prepared for the magnitude of its superiority over the teaching I had done earlier. With only 50 students a semester, in three classes, I knew whom I was teaching. I could meet with each student one on one and calibrate feedback according to the needs and the character of each.

More importantly, the small scale of teaching meant I could give students the freedom to set their own educational agenda, rather than raining PowerPoint bullet points down over a large lecture hall — the regurgitation of which too often stood as a standard of achievement.

In my new role, students set their own paper topics. Their questions drive the discussion, not my research program.

The change in faculty culture was also dramatic. At St. John's we have tenure, but no "associate" or "full" ranks, and contingent teaching is nearly nonexistent. Compensation is determined by a fixed pay scale — no hot-shot-negotiated sweetheart deals. Since publication is de-emphasized, we can focus on cultivating our own intellectual development, which may or may not result in a quantifiable product. Studying something new is, after all, an end in itself, for professors as well as for students.

For all this, our teaching conditions, compared with those of a R1 tenure-line professor, constitute an enormous sacrifice. The demands of teaching are huge (one colleague jokes they are "a violation of the Geneva Conventions") and the pay is low. Class preparations are daunting. Research funds and course releases are very occasional. Person-to-person teaching takes a toll, intellectually and emotionally, that teaching from the front of a lecture hall does not.

When I hear tenured R1 professors fight to save the status quo, I remember my time in research universities. I think of the exceptionally talented contingent faculty members who did the lion's share of the advising or whose job it was to attract students to the major. I think of the tenured professors who assigned multiple-choice tests instead of essays, to minimize grading at the expense of student learning. Our teaching was kept repetitive — one new course a year out of four or five — so as to maximize time that could be spent on research.

One R1 professor once boasted to me (I was a job candidate) that he had never graded an undergraduate paper. Another made guilty noises about the neglect of students — her evident insincerity was, if anything, even more offensive. Both complained over dinner that their graduate students were simply not good enough. (I had a few friends among those students, and I knew how overloaded they were picking up the slack from tenured professors.)

I also remember two professors at a different institution who looked at me as if I had lost my mind when I asked whether they thought students might learn more in smaller classes. In my experience, the more elite the institution, the more it is the norm for research academics to consider teaching to be burdensome "grunt work." The exploitation of adjuncts is the natural outgrowth of such an attitude.

As it stands now, we face a wreck. If we suppose that enrollments are better than the worst forecasts — a 10-percent to 20-percent drop — we will still confront an economic crisis worse than 2008, whose ravages to the wealth of middle-class families (and so to tuition revenue) have been so damaging. If we imagine that universities will survive without cuts, we are deluding ourselves.

What should be saved from the wreckage? In short, learning. Learning is how habits of mind are passed from one generation to the next. It prepares young people for work, and nurtures a human core that endures when work is scarce. Our research universities have forgotten their central educational mission, and the faculty has been willingly, sometimes eagerly, complicit.

It might seem only humane for us to fight for jobs for contingent faculty members. But that fight — absent any other vision for how the system can change — only upholds the radically exploitative status quo. In the face of huge anticipated drops in enrollment and revenue, such a fight can only be a face-saving measure or a vanity project. Cuts will come — the question is in what and to whom. Our time and energy would be better spent fighting for a restoration of learning at universities and for the recovery of an egalitarian spirit for their faculty.

Here's what tenured professors across academe should do. First, they should gather and fight for a place at the negotiating table with the deciders who wield the cutting knife. In the imminent carnage, they can choose to recover their vocations rather than to scramble for the last scraps of privilege. They hold precious leverage: the prestige of the institution, not to speak of the legal privileges of tenure.

They should offer to teach more, offer to give up some funding for research, and offer to take on more service. The days of the prestige researcher, who jets in from Europe for a few months and six figures, should come to a swift and decisive end.

Let the adjuncts go (with fair notice and with unemployment benefits assured). Fight for a smaller administration. Fight for reduced research requirements. Fight for a single pay scale that includes administrators, and, yes, coaches and top-flight surgeons. Fight for smaller class sizes, and for greater freedom in the classroom. Fight for greater faculty governance, for a university worth its name, and for that practice it was always meant to nurture: learning, splendid in itself and beneficial beyond measure, to young and old, to the present generation and those of the future.

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