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# Don't Rock the Boat: Curricular Choices of Contingent and Permanent Composition Faculty

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## **Abstract**

Academic freedom is a keystone of professionalism in higher education, perhaps most immediately in curricular design: the autonomy to create and choose materials for our classrooms. Yet the contingent professoriate majority may lack this freedom in practice, dependent as they are on the approval of students and permanent faculty for continued employment. More concrete data is needed documenting this assumption, as it may carry weight with administrators and aid labor reform efforts. In a case study of an English department in a public university, I examine the textbook choices and sources of writing assignments of contingent and permanent faculty teaching first-year composition. I further inquire into teachers' perceptions of both their freedom to choose materials for courses and their inclusion in the departmental community. I posit that a lack of security and exclusion from departmental culture may result in contingent faculty being less likely to exercise curricular freedoms than their permanent counterparts. Treating contingent faculty as less than professional has limiting effects on curricular decisions.

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**I**I began my academic career as an adjunct. In fact, I could have been the poster girl for the freeway flyer: at one point driving among three institutions, working in bullpen offices, and teaching upwards of five courses a semester. Today I have a Ph.D. in Composition and a tenured teaching position in an English Department, but then I had an M.A. in English with a focus in medieval literature and no job security. Like most literature M.A.'s working in higher education, I was mostly teaching first-year composition (FYC). Early on, with little preparation for or understanding of the teaching of writing, I turned to my textbooks to guide me in structuring the courses and their assignments. My initial assumption was that the textbooks' authors knew best; and if they were further recommended by the Writing Program Administrators (WPAs),

they must represent the best textbooks for my contexts. As I gained more experience teaching writing, I began to see the limitations of some of these texts and their assignments, yet I fretted over rejecting them. My classroom experience taught me a great deal, but I doubted it would be as well respected as a curricular rationale compared to the textbooks or the choices of the WPAs. Whether I used them much or not, I dutifully ordered the departments' textbooks each semester.

Textbooks have long held sway in composition. In *Fragments of Rationality: Postmodernity and the Subject of Composition*, Lester Faigley observes that “Teachers answer with the name of a textbook when asked how they teach writing” (133). It is not simply the pedagogical trust some put in textbooks, however, that lend them their influence over curricular choices, including the assignments professors use. At many institutions, contingent faculty are not permitted to choose their own materials, but are given a syllabus, textbook, and list of assignments by the WPA. Others have more ostensible freedom, but are provided with guidance and recommendations. Given such choice, however, do contingent faculty feel that they are pedagogically free in their classrooms?

The potential negative effects of contingency on teachers' curricular choices have long been a part of institutional critiques. For instance, Gwendolyn Bradley contests that, “Largely unprotected against sudden termination of their employment, contingent faculty have every incentive to avoid taking risks in the classroom or tackling controversial subjects” (30). Similar assertions are made by Marc Bousquet (4) and Karen Thompson (45), among many others. While rich in argument and anecdotes, these commentaries often lack the systematic data that would hold greater rhetorical weight with data-driven academic administrators.

Contingency's effects on curricular choices are perhaps particularly pressing in English Studies; contingent faculty teach almost 70% of composition courses housed within English departments ([ADE Ad Hoc Committee on Staffing](#) 50). This is despite a history of fervent critique of the academic labor system from English scholars like Bruce Horner, Eileen Schell, and Bousquet. With so many teaching under the constraints of contingency, it is well worth investigating whether our arguments and assumptions about the effects of labor conditions on curricular choices bear out.

The great variety of contexts under which contingency is enacted makes getting a big picture of the relationship between labor and curriculum especially challenging. For example, as an adjunct, I taught at a university where I was included in departmental discussions of curriculum, and another where I felt obligated to use assignments I had no part in choosing. At one, I had access to regular faculty who could help me in designing my syllabus; at another, I never spoke to tenure-line faculty beyond administrative interactions with the WPA. Cross-disciplinary and multi-institution surveys do not necessarily allow us to see how the specific culture of a campus or department affects faculty's perceptions of their curricular freedom.

For this reason, this study employs case study methodology to investigate whether contingent instructors and permanent faculty make

curricular choices differently in the Composition Program in a single public university. My expectation is that the smaller scale may allow for a deeper consideration of context while also allowing for replication at other sites. Moreover, my intent is *not* to discredit the work of contingent composition teachers, but rather to challenge a labor system that puts them in tenuous employment positions, often out of their disciplines, and with limited resources.

The main points of inquiry are:

- Does employment status influence the curricular choices of composition teachers?
- Do perceptions of inclusion in the academic community intersect with employment status and curricular choices?

What we do know about contingency in higher education reveals faculty and campuses under stress. In June 2012, the Coalition on the Academic Workforce released some of the most revealing, systematic surveying of the workforce in higher education. [The Coalition found](#), in part, that 75.5% of post-secondary faculty are “employed in contingent positions off the tenure track, either as part-time or adjunct faculty members, full-time non-tenure-track faculty members, or graduate student teaching assistants” (1). The Coalition’s survey of the academic workforce joins a handful of systematic, scholarly studies of contingency, many focused on working conditions or student persistence. Analyses of surveys and institutional data reveal hiring trends (Reichard; Benjamin); difficult work loads of faculty and the many obstacles to teaching with contingent status (Baldwin & Chronister; Gappa; Benjamin); and a negative correlation between a school’s number of contingent teachers and student retention and graduation rates (Bettinger & Long; Harrington & Schibik; Eagan and Jaeger; Ehrenberg & Zhang; Jaeger and Eagan; Jaeger). Doe et al. analyze teaching logs of contingent faculty, revealing that teaching, planning and grading dominate their very full work days (435). Contingent faculty in their study also completed quite a bit of scholarship and service, which often went both unsupported and unreported in their departments (438-442). None of this data suggest that adjuncts are poor teachers, but that their working conditions make teaching significantly more difficult. In fact, 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, Schapiro, & Soter, cited in Jaschik).

A large body of research does exist surrounding the concepts of teacher-choice on the secondary education and elementary education levels, considering, for example: teacher-efficacy’s relationship to student achievement (Moore & Esselman); teacher reflection (Marcos, et al; Britzman); teachers’ mediation of texts (Null); teachers’ cultural beliefs about instruction (Duffy); and teachers’ negotiation of educational policies in their classrooms (Coburn).

In higher education, however, teacher choice has not often been the specific subject of review. A closer examination of teachers' choices may lend further weight to the commonplace that our working

conditions, as framed by employment status, directly affect students' learning conditions.

### **Case Study Design**

I examined the textbook and writing assignment choices of three contingent and three permanent faculty teaching FYC in the English Department of a public university (note: the institution under study will be referred to as Public University). Given the history of critique made by Bradley and others, I further inquired into the teachers' perceptions of both their freedom to choose materials for their courses and their inclusion in the departmental community. I did not document their performances or effectiveness in the classroom.

My case study underscores the effects of labor's material conditions, suggesting that contingent faculty have a different course development process that is less disciplinary. The data suggests that, regardless of their often significant experience and expertise, a lack of security and exclusion from departmental culture may result in contingent faculty being less likely to exercise academic freedom in their choices than their permanent counterparts.

The contingent and permanent faculty under study teach FYC in a Mid-Atlantic, public university, one of many in a state system, and located near a large metropolitan area. While the circumstances of contingent and permanent faculty are far from identical at Public University, this site provides both contingent and permanent faculty with ample choice and support under good conditions, and is thus a suitable place to see the impact of job status on curricular choices. The state system pays contingent workers above the national average and provides health care benefits, as well as the shared protection of all faculty by a state-wide union. Moreover, the English Department at Public University frequently hires contingent faculty on full-time contracts, teaching a full schedule of four classes each semester, the same course load as the permanent faculty. To be clear, a full-time contract may last one or two semesters. Faculty may also be hired part-time, meaning that they teach three or fewer courses in the semester for which they are hired. Faculty may be on a full-time contract one semester and part-time the next, depending on departmental need. Yet a disparity persists in how courses are assigned: as in most other institutions nationwide, contingent faculty teach the lion's share of general education composition. In Fall 2013, out of 62 sections of the general education composition courses (Gen Ed Comp), approximately 46 were taught by temporary faculty. All 20 sections of the non-credit bearing Basic Writing course (BW Comp) offered were taught by contingent faculty.

As is common in many FYC programs, the faculty represent a variety of degrees and specialties. The composition director estimated that none of the temporary faculty hold degrees in composition and Rhetoric, that some have M.F.A.'s in Creative Writing, but most hold MAs or Ph.D.'s in Literature. Some of the permanent faculty teaching FYC hold degrees in composition, but many have specialties in Literature.

The six participants in this study are faculty teaching composition at a public university during the Spring 2012 and Fall 2012 semesters. Three participants are full-time, contingent faculty, each with the rank of Instructor. Three are permanent faculty, two with the rank of Full Professor and one Associate Professor. All names are pseudonyms.

The temporary faculty:

- Susan, M.F.A. in Creative Writing
- Mindy, M.A. in English Literature
- John, Ph.D. in Curriculum Instruction with a focus in English Education.

The permanent faculty:

- Paul, Ph.D. Composition
- Tom, Ph.D. Composition
- Laura, Ph.D. in English Literature.

My aim was to document the curricular choices of these faculty, choices made possible in a department encouraging of academic freedom. Faculty teaching FYC are not issued standard syllabi, assignments, or textbooks, but instead are provided with a list of recommended texts, sample syllabi, and a guide for constructing syllabi for each level of composition, plus an overview of goals and approaches one may take.

To elucidate the decisions made by my participants, I conducted semi-structured interviews, using [Rubin and Rubin's responsive interview techniques](#). This approach “relies heavily on the interpretive constructionist philosophy, mixed with a bit of critical theory and then shaped by the practical needs of doing interviews” (30). According to Rubin and Rubin, “Constructionist researchers try to elicit the interviewee’s views of their worlds, their work, and the events they have experienced or observed” (28). Responsive interviewing is appropriate for this study, concerned with understanding participants' views of a few of their choices made in the context of Public University. Further, critical researchers do not claim “neutrality,” and instead “emphasize action research, arguing that research should redress past oppression, bring problems to light, and help minorities, the poor, the sidelined, and the silenced” (Rubin & Rubin 25). Indeed, I don't claim neutrality: I am critical of the current labor system and hope to be an ally for contingent faculty.

I asked faculty to describe the following: the reasons behind their choices of texts in BW Comp and Gen Ed Comp; the origins of the writing assignments they used in these courses; their perceptions of their freedom to choose curricular materials; and their inclusion in departmental culture. I collected syllabi from each participant, cross-checking their references to assignments and texts. Participants were invited to review and revise their statements during drafting.

I applied procedural coding schemes to interview transcripts in order to document the sources of the professors' curricular materials. Codes were revised in collaboration with two additional readers and in response to continuous reflection on the data. Six categories emerged:

publisher-driven; textbook; interactions with students; disciplinary knowledge; colleagues; and administrative recommendation.

References were coded “publisher-driven” when a speaker remarked on the influence of a publisher's representative or loyalty to a specific company when choosing a text. The code “textbook” was used when a professor noted that he or she used an assignment provided in a textbook. When speakers noted choosing or changing a textbook or assignment after students commented on course materials, “interactions with students” was applied. Overt emphasis of disciplinary criteria or specific pedagogical rationales used in selecting materials was coded “disciplinary knowledge.” References were coded “colleagues” when the speaker emphasized that the texts or assignments were used or recommended by respected colleagues. “Administrative recommendation” was applied when teachers noted that they used the text suggested by the department. Readers collaboratively revised coding schemes for reliability until a minimum [Cohen's kappa](#) of 0.70 was reached for each.

I further coded the data, identifying participants' statements about their academic freedom; access to professional development opportunities; their relationship to the department; and their disciplinary expertise. Comparison of variables allowed me to theorize on the relationships between employment status and curricular choices.

### **Analysis: Curricular Choices and Employment Status**

Both permanent and contingent faculty in this study acknowledged their freedom to choose textbooks and assignments and to design their courses within the parameters laid out in the official course description, such as course objectives and the minimum number of written pages required of students. Despite this policy, contingent and permanent faculty exercised their freedom differently, and chose curricular materials for very different reasons.

### **The Contingent Faculty's Choices of Texts**

Contingent faculty most often referred to recommendations from colleagues or from a department administrator when describing their choices of course texts. The influences of publishers and feedback from students were present, but not as prominent. Only one of the three contingent teachers referenced disciplinary knowledge, and he still used the departmentally recommended texts in his courses.

For example, Susan often referred to consulting with colleagues in our interview: “I chose the text [for Gen Ed Comp] because other faculty members recommended it. I compared it to another recommendation and found it more engaging to read with better questions and writing prompts.” Susan emphasized the community that forms among contingent faculty in the department, especially when four or more of them may share a single office, and underscored the way colleagues become resources for each other. She says, “We're coming from different backgrounds. So we've gotten together at times or we've informally exchanged, ‘Here's an assignment that I give that does this,’ or ‘Here's a textbook recommendation,’ or something like that. But that's



been pretty organic, and that's been from us expressing a need for help with different things and reaching out to each other.”

For Gen Ed Comp, Mindy used the department-recommended text “for many years and never really loved” it. Despite this, only in her *seventh* year working at Public University did she choose a different text, prompted by feedback from students.

John uses the recommended texts in each writing course, but supplements them with texts of his own choosing. Among the contingent faculty I interviewed, only John overtly explained his choices of texts in disciplinary terms. For example, describing a supplemental text in Gen Ed Comp, he explains that he chose a *New York Times* non-fiction bestseller “because that’s really like the exact model that I want them to do, where [the author is] in the writing and she’s really participating in it. But she’s using research to support what she’s seeing.” Despite John’s disciplinary reasoning for choosing these texts, he clearly feels obligated to include the department’s recommended texts in his courses, saying, “Now, we can choose the books that we want, but those are recommended. So coming in here, I’m not going to rock the boat.”

In each case, interactions in the college community most influence contingent faculty’s choices of text, whether taking the advice of trusted colleagues, responding to student needs, or shielding oneself from the judgement of tenure-line professors.

### **The Permanent Faculty’s Choices of Texts**

In stark contrast to their contingent colleagues, permanent faculty all referred solely to disciplinary knowledge when discussing their choices of texts, with no overt mention of feedback from students, suggestions from colleagues, departmental recommendations, or the influence of publishers. Tom, however, does use the recommended text for the first level of Gen Ed Comp. Initially, he served on the committee that chose this text for recommendation. It’s not surprising then, that Tom explains his use of the text in terms of its pedagogical approach, using disciplinary language: “it’s got a pretty progressive critical consciousness as far as understanding rhetoric in the world, multiple genres involved, and also it approaches writing with the assumption that communities of discourse and genres matter.”

Of the two permanent faculty who did not use the recommended texts, neither used a conventional textbook. Instead, they use nonfiction texts not composed specifically for classroom use. For example, Paul explains why he chose to work with a memoir for the second level of Gen Ed Comp: “I can teach research methods better than any of the textbooks I know of. I assign [a memoir] because I want them to read one long text in the course and it fits the theme of the course really well.” Here, Paul is relying on his professional and disciplinary expertise.

Laura cites her research interests in accuracy (regarding how, and why, and to what extent writers document their research) as one reason for choosing a nonfiction text, which her students partially fact-check. She also describes choosing the book for pedagogical reasons, negatively assessing conventional texts in the process: “When I teach the research writing course, I don’t like the textbooks that are usually used



because they don't show documentation and the type of research that we're asking our students to do. So I'm always looking for nonfiction work that has lots of footnotes and lots of research so I can say, 'Here's how it actually works in the world.'"

Given that Tom helped to choose the recommended text he uses, we can say that the permanent faculty each display a greater autonomy in text selection than their contingent counterparts; they rely less on input from students, colleagues, and the department.

### **The Contingent Faculty's Sources of Writing Assignments**

When discussing the sources of their writing assignments, contingent faculty in this study were more likely to cite colleagues, textbooks, and feedback from students as influential. In fact, none of the three directly referenced disciplinary knowledge when discussing their choices of assignments.

As with her discussion of textbooks, Susan values input from colleagues in her choices of assignments. When asked about the sources of the specific assignments listed on her syllabus, Susan noted that she adapts and revises assignments that she exchanges with colleagues: "I looked at what other instructors do, at [Public University] and other schools, and then used those for inspiration as I created my own assignments." In addition to personal exchanges with colleagues, Susan uses materials provided as models by the department as well.

When asked to describe her assignments, Mindy referenced the writing modes listed in her textbook's table of contents. But Mindy does not limit herself to the textbook's offerings, relying as well on exchanges with colleagues in her decision making. For example, in describing the sequence of work in one course, Mindy notes that she might omit the profile assignment after conferring with her officemates and finding that her students may have already completed a profile during the previous semester. Further, students create a magazine in her course, an assignment she got "from a colleague."

Likewise, John uses a combination of assignments from the recommended textbooks and those adapted from colleagues' work. He does occasionally use an assignment of his own design, as in a Letter of Introduction project in BW Comp. Similar to some of Susan's and Mindy's methods, John constructed this piece to allow him to better address students' instructional needs: "I originally did that when I started teaching, because we were new to the area and I just wanted to kind of find out more about my students and where they were coming from and what their motivations were. ... And it brings out some of those kinds of themes that you as a teacher can then shape instruction based on what their needs are."

As with textbooks, a web of considerations influences the contingent faculty's choices of assignments, yet their confidence in their freedom to create assignments of their own from scratch seems limited.

### **The Permanent Faculty's Sources of Writing Assignments**

When asked to explain the sources of their assignments, each permanent faculty member described the disciplinary knowledge behind the design or adoption of materials. For example, Paul explains his use of ethnographic assignments with references to Nancy Mack's "Writing for Change: When Motive Matters," describing Mack's pedagogical approach and its influence on his own: "students do ethnographic research on issues of local ... concern so that they can develop primary knowledge that helps them contest, disagree with, respond to the 'sages...'. That essay is probably as fundamental to my thinking about research writing assignments as they get." At one point, Paul notes that his graduate thesis and dissertation were "about ethnographic writing pedagogy." He also comments on the freedom he has in the department to use this approach in his assignments: "So I don't mean to say that it's an obvious or even a good choice; it's one that intuitively works for me, and I'm fortunate to work in a place where I can have that option."

Laura also feels the freedom to design coursework according to her own training and research interests in accuracy. When describing the theme of other assignments she designed for Gen Ed Comp, Laura emphasized her desire for students to connect to the projects, specifically with one inviting them to explore issues within their majors. She wanted them to avoid work that "they feel is just an exercise for the class." Instead, "it should have something to do with them." Feedback from students, in which they express the relevance of the writing they produce in the course, plays a role in her choices as well.

When asked about the source of a letter of argument assignment, Tom explained that while a version of it does appear in the department-recommended text, he has disciplinary reasons for adapting the text's assignment. He sees a textbook as a source of authority beyond the teacher and the classroom, one the students need in order to feel secure in making decisions: "I know students do need some securities, and a textbook, I think, gives them some security. It tells them I'm going to push you hard, but this is, after all, a class. It is within the university. ... I am preparing you to be successful in that institutional context. So yes, we have a textbook." Tom's reasoning implies that he sees the textbook as a totem and a rhetorical tool that helps students to position composition within their existing understanding of academic study.

### **Discussion**

While they are technically free to choose any text, contingent faculty in this study each used at least one conventional textbook. This may be an indication that those with contingent employment status, despite assurances to the contrary, do not perceive their curricular freedom as absolute. Working on a yearly contract, contingent faculty may be wary of seeming unconventional or out of line with departmental expectations. As a result, they may make some choices with the additional motivation of not "rocking the boat," as John indicated, avoiding scrutiny.

This pattern may extend to assignment choices as well. Even while each contingent professor described remixing the assignments of colleagues, they each also relied on the authority of the textbook, using

some of their ready-made assignments. When contingent teachers did risk making a change, as in remixing assignments from textbooks or other faculty, they did so with the impression of their students' needs in mind—indeed, contingent faculty in this study were very much concerned with their students' learning.

In contrast, permanent faculty in this study referenced disciplinary knowledge exclusively when choosing their texts, and dominantly when describing the sources of their assignments. The disciplinary expertise of Paul and Tom, both with degrees in Composition and Rhetoric, may certainly explain some of their curricular independence. However, Laura, with a degree in Literature, demonstrates the same autonomy. This suggests that the teachers' permanent employment status may also afford them a greater sense of freedom and safety from which to choose materials.

Other factors may affect teachers' choices of texts and assignment design beyond expertise and employment status. For example, the allocation of office space may play a role in contingent faculty's extensive reliance on colleagues. At Public University, permanent faculty are usually assigned two to an office and may arrange schedules to give each other private access. On the other hand, contingent faculty are often in offices housing four or more colleagues, making time alone in the space scarce. Susan's office holds six professors, and Mindy's four. John is situated in a large open room filled with at least a dozen cubicles. Yet the contingent faculty each expressed contentment with their proximity to colleagues, if not with the state of the facilities. They liked being able to discuss work with officemates. Of course, faculty are put in these "bullpen" offices because they are contingent and are housed only with other temporary instructors, so ultimately this increased networking connects to employment status.

While contingent faculty did not frequently reference disciplinary knowledge, they may indeed have disciplinary reasons for choosing methods and materials. They may not have the disciplinary *language* to describe their choices: without specific or extensive training in composition, they may rely on the language of *lore* to explain their practices. *Lore*, coined in this context by Stephen North, is "the accumulated body of traditions, practices, and beliefs in terms of which Practitioners understand how writing is done, learned and taught" (22). North positions *lore* in contrast to *theory*: knowledge gained via systematic, disciplinary study and analysis rather than through teaching practice alone. I am relying on the interview transcripts and participants' syllabi to categorize their reliance on disciplinary knowledge; while revealing, these sources are not necessarily panoptic. As George Hillocks notes, teachers' "performance may reveal what they know more than what they say" (22).

Further, my interpretation of available data is not meant to suggest that contingent faculty don't think in disciplinary terms, only that that they did not reference disciplinarity as the impetus for their choices. Significantly, the interviews suggest that even if teachers have pedagogical reasons to reject a common text or assignment, they may, like Mindy, continue using it for years, or, like Tom, still order and use a

departmental text alongside those they prefer. They are cautious of exercising their academic freedom.

Further analysis of the interviews suggest that teachers' methods and materials are shaped by their perception of freedom, security, and community, all relative to employment status. While contingent faculty in this study made connections with individual colleagues, they did not seem to feel connected to the department community at large. Each described their place in the community in outsider terms, even while noting that their conditions are better than at other institutions.

For example, Susan commented on the term I chose for temporary employees in this study, *contingent*, saying, "It makes us feel like we're floating off, not connected to everything, which is pretty representative I would say, a lot of times of how we are." Mindy emphasizes that Public University treats adjuncts better than some institutions she worked for previously. Despite the better circumstances, Mindy admits that the culture of the campus is not perfect: "The conversations, you know, 'What do we do with those adjuncts?'... I mean, there's a lot of gossip down here. We all hate it because there's no security. We just feel like our jobs are constantly up in the air."

The contingent faculty's sense of disconnection from the department, of being treated as a separate and distinct group of faculty—"those adjuncts"—rather than as equal colleagues, may be exacerbated by their exclusion from department meetings. Tom explained that temporary faculty are "allowed to" attend and are always informed about department meetings. At the same time, these teachers contractually don't have a vote on some issues discussed at department meetings and aren't consulted on others; Tom noted that the "only relevant issues" that temporary faculty would encounter at these meetings are "policies to be applied to them." My interviews with contingent faculty suggest that they have come to believe that these meetings are indeed not for them, that their attendance is not encouraged or particularly wanted. Moreover, most permanent faculty are not perceived as helpful in providing the context necessary for contingent teachers to follow the discussion in meetings.

Mindy offered that, "I've been to a couple, but I really don't know what they're talking about. So I sort of leave because it really does feel like it's a different kind of clock." John described occasions when he attended department meetings, during which he and other contingent faculty were not treated as colleagues, often spoken about as if they were not in the room. John also noted that if they aren't actively encouraged to attend meetings, it may be because "we're not expected to do anything but teach."

While the state-wide contract does in fact indicate that temporary faculty should be evaluated on teaching, service, and scholarly growth, contingent faculty in the English department at Public University do not seem to be held to these obligations, including attending department and committee meetings. Rather than simply creating a sense of freedom to focus on teaching, however, the result is, in part, a sense of disconnect from the departmental community. The stress of working on semester-to-

semester contracts may contribute to this disconnect. Mindy observes, “we just want two year contracts. One year contracts, even!”

Tenured faculty member Tom believes that the above-average pay and benefits for contingent teachers at Public University, coupled with his sense of the faculty’s community, are resources that can lead to better work: “Again, there is that sense of community. That itself is a resource. ...the fact that you’ve got good pay with a union contract, and people know they’re going to be evaluated fairly, that politics in terms of disciplinary positions aren’t going to play into things, that itself is a resource.” Certainly, each contingent teacher I interviewed commented on the superior conditions at Public University as compared to other institutions that employed them. Yet those circumstances don’t seem to have created a sense of belonging among the temporary faculty, and this disconnect may affect their choices. Contingent faculty in this study did not exercise their academic freedom to choose texts and design assignments in the same ways as permanent faculty. The knowledge that they can be let go at the end of any semester, that they may lose health benefits, that, essentially, the institution has not committed to them, may lead contingent faculty to make safer, more conventional curricular choices which are less likely to come under scrutiny.

Participants’ discussion of professional development (teacher training) further suggests that inclusion in the community affects curricular choices. That is, faculty who are well informed about departmental policies and resources, and who feel included in the departmental community, might be better able and willing to access professional development resources that may affect their work. I posit that as they were treated as a separate class of faculty, distinct from the permanent faculty, they were disinclined to take advantage of campus-wide resources intended for all teachers. Instead, they expected that contingent teachers would be offered some class of assistance specifically for them. In the absence of such, they didn’t often participate. They also noted the need for mentoring from permanent faculty.

For example, I asked John if he felt that he had a professional support system in the department. He responded, “I’ve learned that you want to stay off the radar,” further explaining, “you just kind of figure it out on your own.” Mindy, too, expressed the need for mentoring when she first arrived, and described taking it upon herself to learn what she needed to perform her job.

When I asked Susan if the department offered her professional development, she said, “The short answer is no, not really. The longer answer is sometimes things are offered, but, as adjunct faculty, we are either not required to participate, or sometimes, we’re not even encouraged or supported.”

On the other hand, permanent faculty felt more connected to the departmental community and its resources. For example, Tom explained, “it’s a fact that I’ve got a fantastically, scholarly, energetic, supportive, and collegial group of friends...there are about fifteen of us who are Ph.D. trained composition specialists, tenured, or on the tenure-track. And we approach each other with projects in mind.” In stark contrast,

contingent professor John is wary of approaching permanent faculty for support in the same way Tom does: “I just don’t want to bother anybody. Their time is precious.” In fact, Tom admitted that he does not have strong ties with the contingent faculty, due to time, limited space, and the size of the department: “the truth is, I don’t know them all so well.”

The contingent faculty who participated in my study like their jobs, work hard, and excel. They also know that the pay, benefits, and culture at Public University are better than what adjuncts find at many other institutions. Even so, their employment status clearly affected their work.

Several limitations to this study exist. First, the participants may have reasons for their choices of methods and materials above and beyond those stated and implied during the interviews. Moreover, I did not attempt to gauge the actual effects of employment status on professors’ teaching; each may have successes and challenges in the classroom and in the campus community unaccounted for, beyond the participants’ perceptions of their own work and positions. In the same vein, correlating employment status with actual student outcomes in the form of grades or other assessments is beyond the scope of this study. Finally, more case studies in more sites and contexts are needed to test the theories I have offered. To begin, I hope to replicate this study at a community college and a research-intensive university. I encourage other researchers to adapt my methodology and conduct similar studies at other sites as well.

### Conclusions

In *College English*, Monica F. Jacobe (as cited in Doe and Palmquist) observed:

If we combine the facts of contingent academic labor conditions made clear by statistical data and anecdotal evidence (like that of Schell and Vincent Tirelli) with theories about how the human mind shapes an identity, we can begin to see that the isolation and exile of contingent faculty common across the disciplines and across institution types create a body of faculty who are likely to see themselves as outsiders and outcasts, taking on and expressing all of the psychological traits thereof (380).

My case study suggests that this may indeed be true. Exclusion from the departmental community may result in faculty being less likely to exercise academic freedoms and participate in professional development. This exclusion need not take the form of open animosity, as this case study demonstrates. The contingent faculty I interviewed did not see malice in the permanent faculty’s behavior, but poor communication and lack of encouragement go a long way to make teachers feel like outsiders. Moreover, simply being *allowed* to attend department meetings is not sufficient to establish a sense of mutual respect and inclusion—something contingent faculty want and deserve. Permanent faculty might better demonstrate both if they not only talked *about* contingent teachers, but made much greater efforts to talk *to* them, both



during and after department meetings. Contingent faculty should be made a part of the discussions of issues facing the department as a whole, even when they do not have the right to vote on policy. If their opinions as professionals in higher education and classroom teachers are treated as valuable to the departmental community, they may be more likely to act more freely as professionals and teachers. Indeed, departments are surely less informed and less rich when they ignore the insights, study, and experiences of a significant portion of their faculty. Considering the community beyond the department is just as important, of course. Even if tenure-track and tenured faculty did not make them feel like outsiders, the larger university system consistently reinforces that contingent faculty are different, too often with the implication that they are therefore also *lesser*.

Importantly, the lack of security that accompanies contingency may result in the perception that curricular freedom is not absolute. Temporary employees may want to avoid scrutiny, making “safe” choices. While successful teaching and learning can happen under these circumstances, the practice is not equivalent to teachers with disciplinary expertise, confidence in academic freedom, and secure positions applying their knowledge to course design. Given that higher education places a great deal of significance on the literacy learning of students, it makes much more sense to employ and provide teachers with the expertise, security, respect and support needed to excel. Our students and our teachers—all of them—deserve it.

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