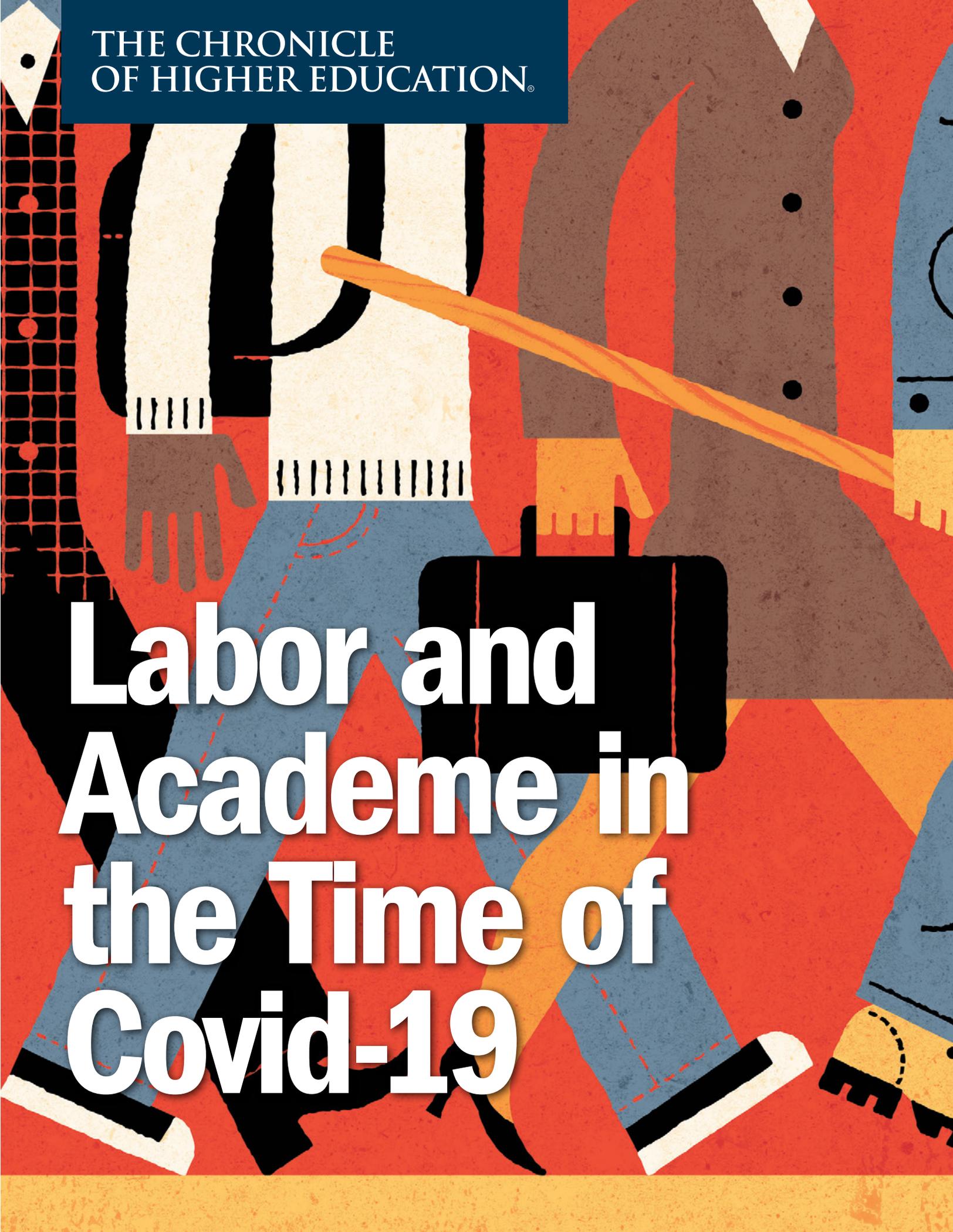


THE CHRONICLE  
OF HIGHER EDUCATION®



# Labor and Academe in the Time of Covid-19

**N**ot long ago, the wildcat strike by graduate students at the University of California at Santa Cruz would have qualified as the most intense and consequential event so far in a long-building crisis: the combination of college-loan debt, low pay, high rental markets, and shrinking post-degree job prospects for Ph.D. students. As data assembled by *The Chronicle* show, the number of cases in which graduate students earn a living wage for a one-parent, one-child household is practically zero.

Then the coronavirus crisis came along, and an already tense situation reached what might very well be a tipping point. The precarity long felt by graduate students is becoming more and more common across academic ranks.

Back in 2011, Stanley Fish, long an opponent of faculty and graduate-student unionization, changed his mind, in large part because, he said, “universities have become increasingly corporate in spirit every day.” Readers of *The Chronicle* will be familiar with the contours of that corporatization: an expanding reliance on adjunct labor; ballooning administrative ranks even as faculty hiring remains flat or declines; and the steady transfer of university governance from faculty to administrative control.

With special (although not exclusive) attention to the effects of the coronavirus, we’ve assembled essential essays and reportage on student strikes, adjunct unions, the academic labor market, and the personal devastation wrought by a system perceived, more and more, as deeply unjust.

# Labor and Academe in the Time of Covid-19

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Cover illustration by Tim Cook

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# After Coronavirus, the Deluge

Administrators have been waiting for the opportunity to finish what they started. Watch out.

By **JACQUES BERLINERBLAU**



ALEX WILLIAMSON FOR THE CHRONICLE

**T**hrough the medium of Zoom, my students are geometrically arrayed across my computer screen in little Brady Bunch boxes. One is a passenger in dad's car, her seatbelt draped around her like an ambassador's sash. Unbeknown to another participant, his brother is fixing a sandwich off in the background: ham, cheese, tartare mayonnaise, kaiser roll, all that. Most of the others are reclining on their beds in the rooms where they grew up, played Pokémon, and never once imagined that their college dreams would be waylaid by Covid-19.

I never once imagined anything like this either. The only doomsday scenarios that I ever entertained centered on the unhealthy, compromised organism that is the American professoriate. Talk about getting waylaid! For decades, we watched the slow-motion disintegration of our profession. Suddenly came the Virus King with its infinite crowns to herd us all online. Now the future is here: looks a lot like the past, but with better sight lines and clear resolution.

In the past, critics like myself and others were urged not to fret about the adjunctification, or "casualization," of academic labor. Again and again, jowly college presidents, rear admirals of learned societies bearing epaulets, line managers at elite doctoral mills, and assorted free-market types in bow ties, assured us that the institution of tenure was doing just swell. When it came to the growing ranks of nontenured, they spoke of "redundancies," "strategic redeployment of resources," and riffed about the need to be "nimble" in response to "shifting market demand." In many ways, these thought leaders were the brainy forebears of our current epistemological moment — a moment in which citizens are implored to ignore relevant data and their own engagement with empirical reality. Everything is perfect.

That things were nowhere near perfect in our vocation was as clear 10 years ago as is the desolate street outside your window today. More contingent faculty taught more undergraduates and were paid less. Those who snared the dwindling proportion of tenure-line positions taught fewer undergraduates and were paid more. In terms of educational quality and learning outcomes,

not to mention the well-being of our ancient guild, absolutely none of it made sense. But you couldn't beat the price!

It cannot be denied that the apathy of tenured professors to the plight of their nontenured colleagues is a failure of common decency and professional solidarity (about which, more anon). But it pales in comparison to the dereliction of duty of our administrative overseers. It is they who made more or less all of the decisions just mentioned. Once those decisions were put into play, all that remained was for the present Covid-19 crisis to accelerate our free fall to the bottom.

And what do fuddy duddies like me believe lies down there, at the bottom? The functional disappearance of tenure as an institution within a few decades (with a few elite institutions remaining as outliers); the expansion of the heartless casualization we see today to maybe 80 percent of scholars in this country; the absence of adequate compensation, job security, and health care for all but a few professors; the continued, though admittedly also self-inflicted, decline of the humanities. As for academic freedom — do we really need to have this argument again? — it simply cannot exist without tenure. How the humanities and the interpretive social sciences don't mutate into entirely different discourses in the absence of such protections is beyond me.

**D**on't let a good crisis go to waste!" If there were a modicum of trust between faculty and administration nationwide, I'd never assume that this type of thinking is in play. The decision to shut down schools was warranted, as was the decision to move courses online. But now that we are here, what guarantees that the word- and thought-defying "cost-cuttingness" of this endeavor won't be "evaluated"? Some number-cruncher will recognize this crisis for the unprecedented opportunity it actually is.

And not only number crunchers! On the pages of *The New York Times*, Richard Arum and Mitchell Stevens — described as "experts in innovation on college education" — view this moment as an "exquisite" opportunity. "One positive outcome from the current crisis," the authors observe, "would

be for academic elites to forgo their presumption that online learning is a second- or third-rate substitute for in-person delivery.” The authors go in for the chide: “This is snobbish, counterproductive and insensitive to the nation’s critical need for affordable college options.”

I have a question for Arum, co-author of an important book on the undeniable shortcomings of college teaching: Why is it snobbish to assume, just as higher education is reaching more diverse students than ever before, that a professor at a community college should be offered a decent, living wage so as to better serve the people who study there? Why would we abandon a face-to-face teaching model that has unambiguously benefited a massive professional class since the American Association of University Professors and Association of American Col-

## What administrator will stand in the way of a third-party provider’s plan to monitor every undergraduate eye movement and finger click?

leges established tenure guidelines in 1940?

What will happen to academic freedom when every lecture is “capturable”? What administrator will stand in the way of a third-party provider’s desire to data-mine the crud out of every undergraduate eye movement and finger click? Why wouldn’t “product placement” be the norm in digital pedagogy? Oh, and in this Age of Lurk, how will professors not be monitored as they expound on the ideas that neither the college, the board of trustees, nor the third-party provider finds helpful? In short, what delicious deplatforming possibilities exist when the plat-

form itself is not governed by faculty?

As we ponder these issues, let me note that the breakdown of the professoriate alluded to above was no “outside job.” The presidents, provosts, deans, vice deans, and mid-level administrators who slowly restructured the budgetary, and hence moral, priorities of our colleges were “one of us.” The overwhelming majority of them were scholars holding the highest degrees in their fields.

In 100 years, some sociologist — assuming those things still exist — will look back at the Great Academic Die-Off and wonder why solidarity was so lacking in this guild. Why did individuals who went to the same graduate schools, earned the same degrees, and climbed the same tenure ladders so thoughtlessly trash their own vocation? Do beat cops that become detectives immediately proceed to dismantle the unions to which they once belonged? Do lawyers who ascend to the rank of partner set out to reduce opportunities for every associate that joins the firm? Why, our sociologist might ask, did scholars cannibalize their own profession?

Years back, my son told me about a Pokémon named Gengar. He hid in dark corners, poised to pounce on his prey and steal its life force. Just last week the boy was evicted from his own dorm room in New York — a wise and responsible decision made by, yes, college administrators. Next week he’ll be in a Zoom box, looking at an image of a scholar whose livelihood, vocation, and even existence are imperiled in ways the scholar can and cannot see.

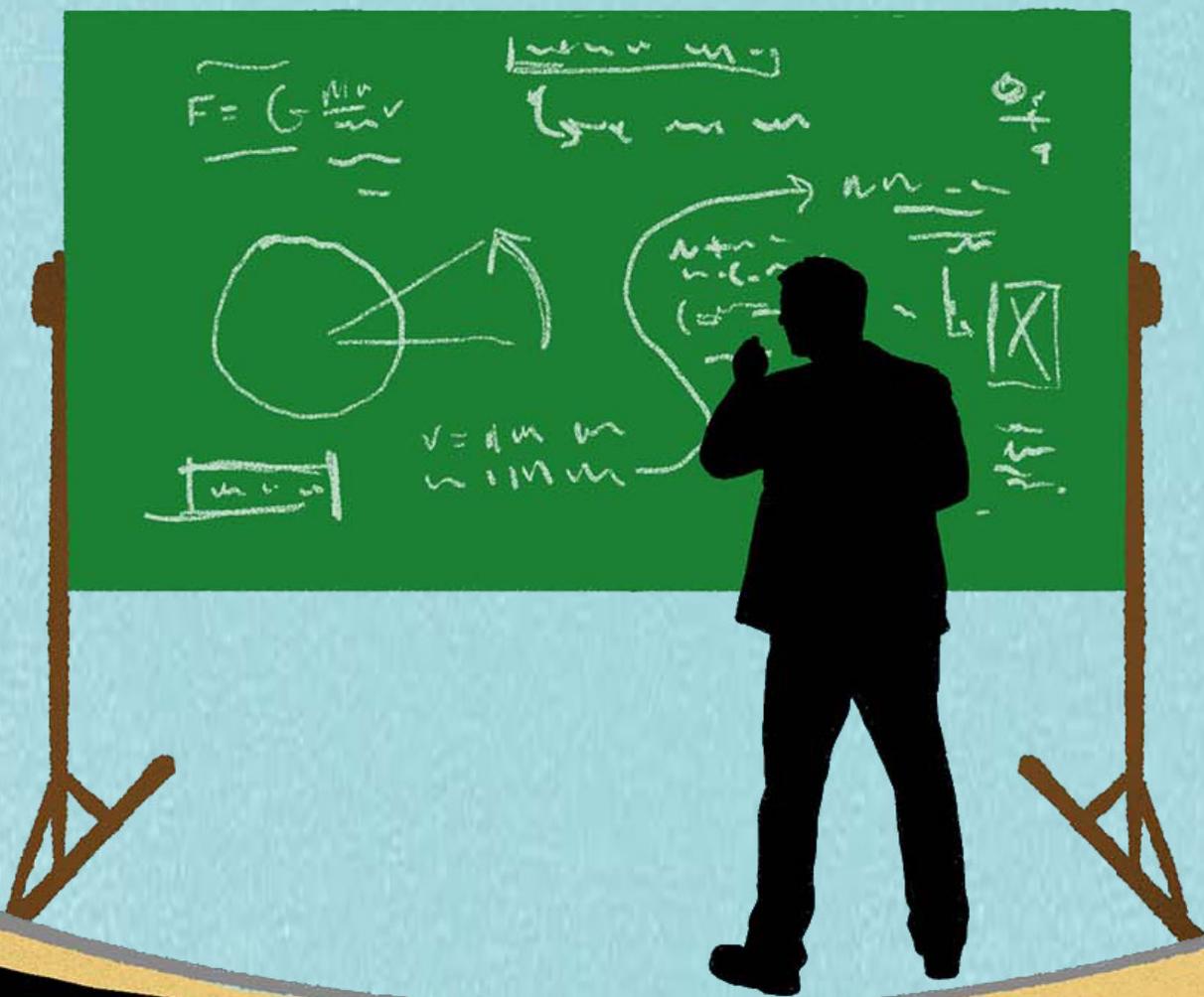
*Jacques Berlinerblau is a professor of Jewish civilization at Georgetown University. His most recent book is Campus Confidential: How College Works, or Doesn’t, for Professors, Parents, and Students (Melville House). His next book is The Philip Roth We Don’t Know: From #MeToo to Metempsychosis (University of Virginia Press). Follow him on Twitter @Berlinerblau.*

*Originally published March 26, 2020*

# Academe's Coronavirus Shock Doctrine

Faculty members are already stretched thin, and now they are being asked to do more. They should hesitate before doing so.

By ANNA KORNBLUH



**N**ever let a crisis go to waste. In her bestselling book *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, Naomi Klein observes that disasters, emergencies, and breakdowns often prove inspirational to entrepreneurs, and just as often provide ideological cover for the repurposing of public funds and the reconfiguration of labor conditions. Covid-19 looks like it will furnish exactly this sort of pretext. Faculty members — a variegated group that has not excelled at thinking of ourselves as a collective — should beware.

As the home of expertise across the research and medical sciences, public policy, and human expression, universities are taking a leadership role in responding to this pandemic, especially given the absence of a functioning federal government. Being on the front lines means that universities are acting rapidly to take the kinds of dramatic steps necessary to flatten the contagion curve and limit harm. But unlike some elementary schools or businesses, U.S. universities are not simply closing; they are ordering faculty to ensure “continuity of instruction” by moving classes online.

## **Faculty must have a seat at the table when redefinitions of teaching are taking place.**

Online education has several benefits and has seen experimentation and progress, often thanks to big budgets. Yet the mandate for this sudden conversion of large swaths of higher education to an online format threatens to trigger a breakneck paradigm shift with unforeseen ramifications. Shock doctrines make emergencies the new normal — they turn temporary exertions into permanent expectations. American higher education has already endured several slow-moving disasters over the past 40 years: the radical defunding of public institutions, the casualization of academic labor, the militarization of campus security,

and the erosion of faculty governance. As a result, the very instructors now tasked with the herculean transition are already working in extreme conditions: Somewhere between two-thirds and three-quarters of college and university teaching is performed by non-tenure-track faculty members or by graduate students, many of whom conduct heavy course loads without health insurance and with suppressed wages, housing insecurity, and stifling debt.

**T**he directive for immediate transition conceals a tremendous labor intensification. Faculty are being asked to redesign their courses and reinvent their pedagogy on an emergency basis. Are there appropriately urgent ways to limit virus exposure while also allotting time for these laborious undertakings? Could all courses be suspended for a week to give faculty time to survey students about their internet access, computer ownership, and data limits — and to give institutions time to redress inequities in student access? What about time for faculty to reconcile the lack of alternatives to face-to-face learning for laboratories, ensembles, seminars, and studios? Time for disability services offices to train faculty members in online accommodations? Time for institutions to devise support systems for faculty teaching from “home” when home might be scrambled by young children whose own schools are closed? Time to develop collaboration workarounds with crucial staff, who should also be afforded “social distancing”?

While we need institutional support for these transitions, we also need to be involved in decision making. We are the experts in the classroom, so we should have a seat at the table whenever redefinitions of “classroom” and “instruction” are taking place. We must have autonomy over the new paths for our courses. We are the ones who meet students face to face, so we know not to underestimate the uncertainties confronting those whose families may be sick or vulnerable, whose employment prospects may be uncertain, whose campus lives are disintegrating. The edict that students continue the labor of education amid calamity is its own strain-normalizing spike. Students

want to learn, and faculty members want to teach, desperately so in devastating times, but crisis learning must not exacerbate the existing crises in higher education.

What comes after the shock? If instruction is going to be utterly transformed, then other protocols and systems must be too, and faculty members ought to insist upon assurances and protections now. Intellectual property rules by which universities claim ownership over materials uploaded to course-management software must be completely suspended; we cannot willingly contribute to the rebranding of education as “content delivery.” Universities must explicitly ensure that third-party platforms will not monetize our words for Big Data and our faces for surveillance industries. Faculty performance reviews (crucial to renewal for contingent faculty, to merit pay, to tenure proceedings) should be reformatted to account for the derailed “outputs” when conferences and guest lectures have been canceled, publications slowed, and alternate teaching strenuously improvised. Student evaluations should not be proctored or employed as usual. Face-to-face learning is irreplaceable — even in a virtualizing culture, even when classroom infrastructures are overcrowded and outmoded, even when administration has become the dominant sector in education. Absent firm administrative commitments to resume ordinary instruction after the virus subsides, and in the presence of administrative memos

specifying “indefinite” and “permanent” dimensions of the transition, faculty as a group should pause before making the extraordinary efforts now demanded.

Societal straits present openings for reinvention. The history of capitalist crisis shows how often these reinventions have come at the expense of average workers. But faculty are a creative lot who should be able to anticipate and deflect the risks of coronavirus shock doctrine. We must seize this moment to organize for student-debt relief, student and faculty health care, and the public goods of research and expertise. Tasked with conjuring continuity in a pandemic, we find ourselves at a precipice that clarifies how much we have overworked to weather the structural adjustment of higher ed, and how much we have in common with each other — with the hourly employees who make the university and its surrounding businesses go, with our students, with the school teachers who’ve been struggling and striking nationwide. A cataclysm is here. What can we collectively rebuild?

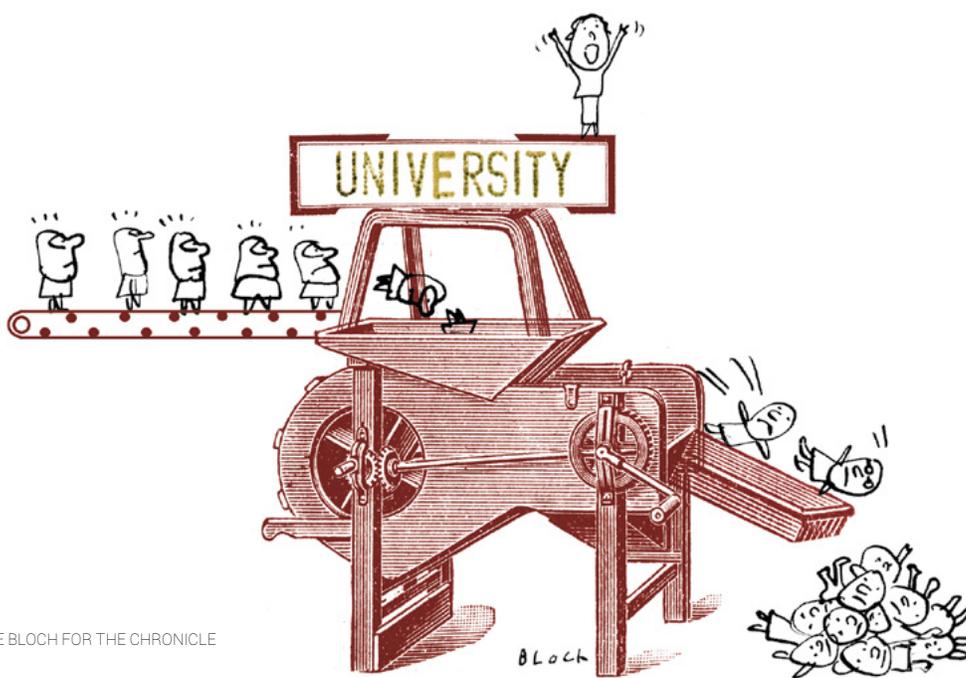
*Anna Kornbluh is associate professor of English at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She gratefully acknowledges communal conversations about faculty concerns in various social media venues.*

*Originally published March 12, 2020*

# How the Coronavirus Will — or Should — Transform Graduate Education

The polite fiction of grad school as an apprenticeship for a future career now faces obliteration.

By DENNIS M. HOGAN AND RITHIKA RAMAMURTHY



SERGE BLOCH FOR THE CHRONICLE

**G**raduate workers all over the country are organizing against a fresh wave of austerity that will affect both public and private institutions. At our own university, Brown, the graduate union has released a five-point plan highlighting the most urgent needs, such as extending funding, protecting international-student visas, and guaranteeing no-cost medical treatment for students who

contract Covid-19. Graduate workers have made similar demands at many private and public universities, including Emory, Princeton, and Purdue Universities, and the University of North Carolina.

Like it or not, the coronavirus crisis will transform graduate education. University administrations have the power now to move toward greater equity — or to amplify inequality even further. Choosing the path

of equity will require democratizing university governance. Otherwise, graduate education will survive but only at the expense of graduate students.

For doctoral students, already facing uncertain futures while surviving on stipends that rarely reflect the cost of living in major cities or college towns, the pandemic and imminent recession have accelerated an ongoing decline. As at many institutions, graduate students at Brown are confronting widespread disruption of research and professionalization, sudden shifts in immigration status, and overnight shuffling of care responsibilities. Students have reported having to return from the field after only one month of research and postponing their dissertation progress indefinitely as funding clocks run out. Others have found it difficult to continue making progress with relatives hospitalized or children at home full time.

Graduate students everywhere are spending more time developing lesson plans for remote teaching without additional compensation or resources. Like faculty members, graduate students are also helping their students navigate disruptions to their own lives. All of these challenges are intensified by the fact that graduate-student stipends were insufficient even before the crisis. What was once a fight for sustainable conditions has become a struggle against impossible ones.

In many disciplines, departments already admit incoming classes much larger than they are able to place in jobs and postdoctoral appointments. As university after university announces hiring freezes, academic-job prospects for graduate students will go from bleak to nonexistent. The polite fiction of graduate school as an apprenticeship for a future academic career, which has been under strain for many years, now faces obliteration. In most cases graduate school is a fixed term of employment offering substantial benefits both to departments, which gain highly motivated and engaged young researchers as well as committed instructors, and to graduate students themselves, who pursue advanced knowledge and original research.

These basic realities should not change. Graduate funding packages should reflect

the conditions of this particular employment relationship. This includes clearly communicated expectations about how teaching and research obligations fit into the student's funding package, and clear lines of accountability and avenues of appeal between graduate students and supervisors. Graduate-student support packages should likewise include 12 full months of financial support, since neither work nor living expenses end in the summer. In many disciplines, expectations for what a dissertation is or should be can be modified or adjusted according to a student's interests and career plans (at some universities, these kinds of solutions have already been implemented). Finally, if we are going to think realistically about the Ph.D. as an employment relationship (one that offers substantial benefits and incurs substantial responsibilities), then administrators and graduate schools should work with graduate-student unions where these exist or have won elections, and support (or at least not oppose) organizing efforts in places where they are not yet established.

A road map to fixing graduate education is indistinguishable from a road map to fixing the university generally. Such a plan would need to wean the university off of its dependence on cheap and disposable labor, ending not only the widespread reliance on adjuncts to teach undergraduate classes, but also the replacement of tenure lines with postdoctoral and visiting positions. One solution to this problem may well be ending the exceptionalization of tenure and democratizing robust job protections across the university. Such a change would go a long way to ending the brutal bifurcation of outcomes in which a small minority of Ph.D. job-seekers secure coveted tenure-track positions with a promise of lifetime employment, while the majority cobble together a living at or near the poverty line as the price for maintaining a semblance of an academic career. This could likewise have the effect of slowing the productivity arms race, with its perverse incentives and outcomes detrimental to both the lives and the work of scholars.

Any plan to "fix" graduate education must also be a plan to radically democratize

university decision-making. The economic disruption occasioned by the pandemic will push universities to socialize the losses, even as the economic gains of the past 10 years have gone disproportionately to a small minority. As Christopher Newfield and others have argued, public universities (and many programs and departments within even the best-funded private universities) exist under conditions of permausterity, in which every expenditure and every outlay must be justified according to budgetary imperatives closely overseen by administrators whose own expenditures go largely unperturbed.

The conditions of permausterity are exacerbated by a steady upward redistribution of discretion and decision-making power to administrators, who, even when they act with the best of intentions, are responsible

## **A reorganization of the university would extend power to staff, grad students, and adjuncts.**

to an even higher power: a board of trustees or regents who rule by fiat, asking universities to run leaner and do more with less, irrespective of the human costs of their plans or the harm done to teaching and scholarship. In other words, what gets naturalized as unavoidable austerity is a chosen set of conditions.

Moving toward a democratic university necessitates strategic thinking about how to secure the health of the institution, which is inseparable from the well-being of the people who constitute it. If spending cuts are to be made, there must be a process that allows for real consensus around the institution's mission, what its core functions are, and how they can best be funded. Consensus from above must be resisted. A democratic university demands the creation of faculty-governance structures that facilitate solidarity with vulnerable workers and permit faculty and workers to stand together and be

heard together by the administrative hierarchy. A commitment to democratic self-governance will prioritize issues of equity and diversity, not simply outsource them to viewbooks or already embattled departments like African American studies, Women's and Gender studies, and ethnic studies. Such an institution must also refrain from colluding with conservative governments to suppress the rights of its workers to organize and demand what they need.

**A** move toward democratization should enlarge our understanding of the university in and as a community. In other words, we ought to ask: If the university aspires to serve the public, who is the public we imagine ourselves serving, and how can it be expanded? A democratic reorientation of the university would extend real power to staff, graduate students, and adjunct and contingent instructors, minimize the authoritative role of boards of trustees, reduce the outsized salaries of presidents and provosts, offer job security to all workers on campus, and advocate for public enrichment and education. The university could perhaps then serve as a much-needed model for a society which prioritized the public good.

We are convinced, given the multiple crises confronting higher education, that the only way to save graduate education in anything like its current form is to alter the structures of university governance. Whatever happens, graduate schools will likely see an increase in applications as young people seek out relatively safe places to ride out the worst years of the coming recession. It may be tempting to suppose that a continued influx of new Ph.D. students means that graduate education remains robust (irrespective of individual outcomes), or, more cynically, that nothing has to change since graduate school, if it does not offer a good deal, is still offering a better one than gig work or the unemployment line.

This is a dangerously narrow perspective. Even if Ph.D. enrollments increase, undergraduate enrollments will almost certainly decrease, and many of the institutions that once employed graduating Ph.D.s will be forced to close. Higher-level administration

can continue to streamline the university according to even more ruthlessly neoliberal logics, but there is no guarantee that undergraduates will continue to go into debt for the degree such a university confers, nor any indication that universities might begin to move away from their tuition dependence. In this instance, graduate students will simply be among the first of many groups to discover that they have been made superfluous.

**What was once a fight for sustainable conditions has become a struggle against impossible ones.**

In this unprecedented collective crisis, higher education has a chance to remake itself as an institution for the public good. Only a university restructured along rad-

ically democratic lines, along with robust state investment in both research and public education, has any chance of fixing the related problems of high tuition, mounting student debt, and exploitative employment. Yet we cannot expect that administrations will voluntarily cede the authority they have painstakingly accumulated: Winning a democratic university will require concerted cross-institutional, cross-rank, solidaristic organizing. Organizing to demand democratization will provoke polarized, politicized fights. Thankfully, groups of academics dedicated to building such solidarities have already begun to emerge. Whether universities will heed their call is another question. Until then, it is not only the future of graduate education, but the fate of the university itself, that hangs in the balance.

*Dennis M. Hogan and Rithika Ramamurthy are graduate students at Brown University.*

*Originally published May 4, 2020*



NARAYAN MAHON FOR THE CHRONICLE

Anna Meier, a doctoral student in political science at the U. of Wisconsin at Madison, at her home in Madison.

# For Many Graduate Students, Covid-19 Pandemic Highlights Inequities

By MEGAN ZAHNEIS

**A**s higher education reels from the effects of the coronavirus pandemic, graduate students say they face a unique set of challenges, including difficulty getting access to research materials, concern about finishing their degrees on time, and pressing financial troubles. Administrators are focusing attention on faculty members and undergraduates, some grad students complain, reinforcing the feeling that they are second-class citizens.

Anna Meier, a fifth-year doctoral candidate in political science at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, said her peers are preoccupied with paying their rent and the fees graduate students pay each semester for the use of campus facilities. The supports her department has announced thus far — doubling conference-travel funding for 2021,

extending deadlines on papers — are, she said, “missing the point.”

“They feel a lot more like hand-waving at real problems, which are that graduate students don’t have enough money right now. Trying to give them very small chunks of money or small deadline extensions in the future,” Meier said, “might not be relevant if they can’t make their financial circumstances work right now.”

“A lot of the work that I’ve been seeing that departments are doing to try to help graduate students, it’s all about their futures,” she continued. “But they might not have a future if they can’t pay their rent in the next couple of months.”

A Wisconsin spokeswoman wrote by email that the institution was making additional financial aid available to graduate students,

including international students and others who weren't previously getting aid. "Graduate students are a critical part of our educational and research missions, and we will continue to support them," she wrote.

Meanwhile, the Wisconsin graduate-student union has set up its own mutual-aid fund, which has raised nearly \$10,000 in a GoFundMe campaign.

Meier said that responses by some administrators to graduate students' appeals for more funding or deadline extensions illustrate a systemic inequity that has dogged grad students for decades.

"A really common response to graduate students is that 'We're all struggling right now,' and that's very true," Meier said. "It's very different to struggle when you make a six-figure salary versus when you make \$20,000 a year, which is my guaranteed stipend rate. It's very different to struggle when you don't have the three months of savings that every financial adviser says that you should have."

"I would just really encourage people to remember," she said, "that graduate students are struggling and precarious in the best of times, and these are not the best of times, and we need help now and over the summer, not a year from now."

### Life Factors

Alejandro Guardado is a case in point. He was slated to finish his master's degree in history at California State University at Los Angeles in May, but had been counting on being able to consult sources from Mexico for his research on state violence and religious activism in Mexico during the 1960s and 1970s.

Now that he's unable to have those materials transferred to his institution's library, Guardado finds himself in a difficult position. "I'm either forced to ignore significant scholarship that I feel like I have to speak to, to be honest with my readers, or I'm really just forced to buy everything," Guardado said. He's been looking on Amazon for used books.

Guardado works 35 hours a week at a local supermarket, and has been consumed by worry about his possible exposure to Covid-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus. His mother has diabetes, and he doesn't want to infect her.

Those issues, and working from home, have made it a struggle to focus on his scholarship. One of eight siblings, he said he'd slept in the living room his entire life, and had grown accustomed to doing his schoolwork elsewhere.

"I am used to working at coffee shops or libraries," he said, "so it's hard to put together thoughts, along with the stress financially, to formulate something that's supposed to be competitive intellectually or something that I'm proud of."

He planned to start a Ph.D. program in the fall, but doesn't know if that's still economically or logistically feasible.

### Travel and Research Delays

Alice Wolff, an archaeobotanist and second-year Ph.D. student at Cornell University, has done fieldwork every summer since 2012. While the sample collection she'd planned to do abroad this summer won't happen, she considers herself lucky — she still has some material to work with at home. Many of her peers, she said, aren't in that position.

"If you're at a stage when you need to be able to fly to this place in Europe and get dirt from this particular place to do your experiments," Wolff said, "your research kind of gets halted and you're not going to be able to get back there for potentially another year. There's this year gap where it's sort of like you're spinning your wheels."

The pandemic's interruption of research has already led many colleges to grant tenure-clock extensions for faculty members. But graduate students have not won similar grants of extra time-to-degree and funding.

Wolff's adviser has been writing clauses in each of his advisees' annual progress reviews about the pandemic's effect on their studies, "so that in the future, if we're having time-to-degree issues, we have this on record." But Wolff said she hadn't gotten any broader assurances from Cornell about how it plans to help graduate students.

Wolff worries about whether the research material she and her peers have on hand will last the rest of the pandemic. "If we're only shut down for maybe two to six months, then that's fine," she said. "But after six months, it starts to get into 'OK, what do we do now? Physically, what do we work on?'"

## The Student-Worker Divide

The pandemic has shined a light on the odd, hybrid position that graduate students occupy: sometimes treated as students, other times as employees. Jeffrey Letourneau wasn't sure what that meant for him when Duke University's president emailed two weeks ago that "all undergraduate, graduate, and professional students who are currently out of town for Spring Break should NOT return to the Duke campus, if at all possible." Would he, a third-year Ph.D. student in molecular genetics and microbiology, be allowed to return to the lab where he works?

Letourneau said a series of phone calls to various offices at Duke had helped him assemble "bits and pieces" of information, but communication from Duke to graduate students has been inconsistent and infrequent.

"You have to wade through information that's updating constantly, and then pick apart which is the most relevant for you," Letourneau said.

He pointed out that the Duke Graduate Student Union, of which he is a member, has dealt with the student-worker ambiguity firsthand. "Employees get dental care, but grad students aren't really employees.

But then other times, like if they want us to come into work during a pandemic, then we're considered employees," Letourneau said.

Some principal investigators in other

Duke labs, he said, perhaps concerned about maintaining grant funding or staying on track for tenure, have ordered graduate students to continue coming to work, even after the university directed nonessential research to stop.

The graduate union at Duke has issued a series of demands to administrators, including the adoption of a standard work policy, a guarantee of summer funding, the creation of paid-time-off and sick-leave policies, and the suspension of such "milestone deadlines" as

qualifying exams and dissertation defenses.

In an email to *The Chronicle*, a Duke spokesman said the institution's graduate students had been "contacted directly and repeatedly as circumstances have changed and new policies have been implemented to protect the health and safety of all members of our community."

"The whole coronavirus crisis has been a rapidly changing situation — actions that were inconceivable in the morning became standard operating procedure by the evening," Michael Schoenfeld, vice president for public affairs and government relations and chief communications officer, wrote. "There have been many times over the past few weeks in which that information has shifted dramatically, sometimes in the space of a few hours. It's understandable that people are anxious and confused — we all are."

## Departmental Solutions

Some graduate institutions have considered adjusting degree requirements. New York University's history department, for instance, is changing the format of its doctoral comprehensive exams, said Andrew Needham, the director of graduate studies.

Ordinarily, doctoral students would sit for the exams on three consecutive days, eight hours a day. That practice, Needham quickly realized, wouldn't be workable this year.

The department considered postponing the exams for all students, but chose not to because, as Needham said, doing so "essentially kicks the can down the road." In the end, the exams will take place, but students will have the option to take them in August rather than May. "We've tried to be flexible while still saying, 'You have the opportunity to finish these things,'" Needham said.

One option was to give students a month this spring to complete the exams. But after soliciting feedback from students, Needham said, that idea, too, was jettisoned. "Having that kind of thing sitting in your brain for a month could lead to a certain kind of paralysis of anxiety," he said.

Instead, the department adopted a student's suggestion: allowing a week to complete the exams. That span will permit students more time than the three-day structure, compensating for their lack of easy

**“You have to wade through information that’s updating constantly, and then pick apart which is the most relevant for you.”**

access to library materials but not stretching the exam period too long.

“We really have been sure to communicate with the students and the faculty that more time does not now represent ‘OK, we expect some kind of super-polished answer,’” Needham said. The department will maintain standards but make allowances for what he called “this crazy, unprecedented moment.”

With that solution in place, Needham now plans to turn to longer-term concerns, including time-to-degree requirements. He’s observed “broad agreement” among faculty members that those time limits should be extended, and that doctoral fellowships should be prolonged “at least an extra semester.”

“That need will hold for any kind of field-work discipline where it’s just not possible to be in the field, however that is defined, whether it is ethnographic, whether it’s archival,” Needham said. “Now that the immediate fire is somewhat under management, I think those kinds of longer-term concerns are the next thing I really intend to start figuring out.”

### Questioning Graduate-Program ‘Normality’

Despite her exhortations for graduate programs to offer short-term aid to their students, Anna Meier, the political-science student at Wisconsin, is also concerned about the long-term issues Needham plans to explore.

Meier’s dissertation will compare attitudes on counterterrorism in the United States and Germany, and she completed archival research in Germany last summer. But with planned research this summer in Washington, D.C., on hold, she isn’t sure what path to take.

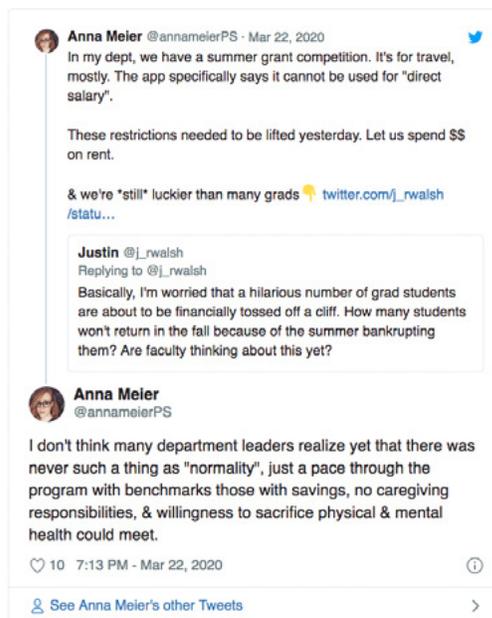
“If I can’t travel and I can’t find an alternative way of getting the data that I need for my research, either through doing Skype interviews or rethinking this part of my project, then I really don’t have a dissertation, to be perfectly honest,” Meier said. “If I don’t really have a dissertation, then how do I rethink it? How long does that take?”

Meier had planned to go on the job market this fall. While she still hopes to do so, she wonders if she will be a viable candidate.

Of course, as colleges freeze hiring, there will be fewer positions available. That market scarcity, Meier fears, will mean search committees can be choosy.

“There are so many fewer jobs, you’re going to have to be that much better to get them, have gotten many more publications, have gone and collected this much more data, have invented this new methodology for studying xyz,” Meier said. “If you don’t have that, you’re not going to be a competitive candidate because there just are not going to be enough jobs.”

Ultimately, Meier hopes, the pandemic will call into question the accepted norms of graduate education — when students are expected to finish their coursework, to take comprehensive exams, to defend their dissertation.



“Even in the best of times, that schedule really assumes that you have enough money to get by, that your family is healthy, that you don’t have care-giving responsibilities, that you’re willing to sacrifice physical and mental health, to some extent,” Meier said.

These, of course, are not the best of times.

“I don’t think many department leaders realize yet that there was never such a thing as ‘normality,’” Meier mused recently on Twitter. “That illusion was always inequitable. Acting as if it can carry on after this is downright cruel.”

*Megan Zahneis is a reporting fellow for The Chronicle.*

*Originally published March 26, 2020*



JAMES YANG FOR THE CHRONICLE

# Don't Forget About Graduate Students

Our labor sustains colleges' educational mission.  
Now it's time for universities to sustain us.

By **NADIRAH FARAH FOLEY**

**A**s the urgency and severity of the coronavirus pandemic have become apparent, universities have rapidly been thrust into troubled — and uncharted — waters. They have required students to evacuate their dormitories, faculty to move classes online, and staff to work remotely, all to prioritize safety while maintaining the educational mission. With the immediate crises of getting students home and classes online now largely behind us, colleges are now starting to focus on longer-term issues.

Across the academy, research has come to a grinding halt. Access to archives, labs, libraries, and field-research sites has been disrupted. Research with human subjects faces new difficulties. In light of all this, dozens of universities have announced extensions of the tenure clock for tenure-track faculty. These extensions acknowledge a new reality: It's not easy to produce scholarship during a pandemic.

And yet there have been only a few an-

nouncements of similar support for graduate students. The University of California at Berkeley is allowing doctoral students to apply for one-semester increases in time to complete their degrees, and the sociology department at the University of Maryland at College Park has extended graduate-program milestones by an additional semester, for instance. But when I ask fellow graduate students what changes their programs have made to accommodate them, the answer, generally, is none.

Graduate students are navigating the same disruptions as faculty members, and generally doing so with fewer resources. Like faculty members, graduate students are still teaching, sometimes as primary instructors. They are on their universities' front lines of supporting students through this difficult time. And like faculty members, graduate students have partners and families to care for. Some graduate students find themselves thrust into full-time child care — even full-time single-parenting, as is

the case for colleagues of mine whose partners work in essential industries like health care. And that's to say nothing of the grave reality that some of us, or our families, will get sick, if we have not already.

All the conditions that merit tenure-clock extensions for faculty apply to graduate students. And the combination of financial uncertainty, pressure to graduate within a given time frame and before funding runs out, and disruption in our academic work underscores the urgency of our situation. In the rush to move instruction online and undergrads off campus, figuring out how to keep classes going was, rightly, institutions top priority. But universities should delay no longer on attending to the needs of their graduate students, some of whom may find themselves in an impossible situation.

**W**hat should this support look like? An expensive, but necessary start: Universities must ensure all current graduate students receive funding (including tuition and fees, health insurance, and a way to earn a stipend) for at least an additional semester — but ideally, a year, given the timing of hiring for academic jobs. With dissertations hanging in the balance, many students may no longer be on track to graduate within the five- or six-year time frame their funding package covers. Even earlier-stage doctoral students may be facing delays that will affect their ability to complete their master's papers or other requirements to advance to candidacy. Finding the money may prove a challenge, but departments must at least assure current graduate students that they are willing to go to great lengths to advocate for them. I've heard talk of departments not admitting a fall-2021 cohort in order to better serve existing graduate students' needs. While such a move may not ultimately prove necessary, even suggesting that it is on the table is a reassurance that current students are a priority.

Secondly, departments must centralize and standardize support for graduate students. Many graduate students I've spoken with recently have indicated that their departments have instructed students to speak to their advisers, leaving things up in the air. While the adviser-student relationship is im-

portant, this approach misses the point. The issues graduate students face are systemic issues necessitating institutional responses, not idiosyncratic personal needs. We're living in a new norm, and many of the questions graduate students are wondering about — for instance, funding and degree benchmarks — would be better answered by departments.

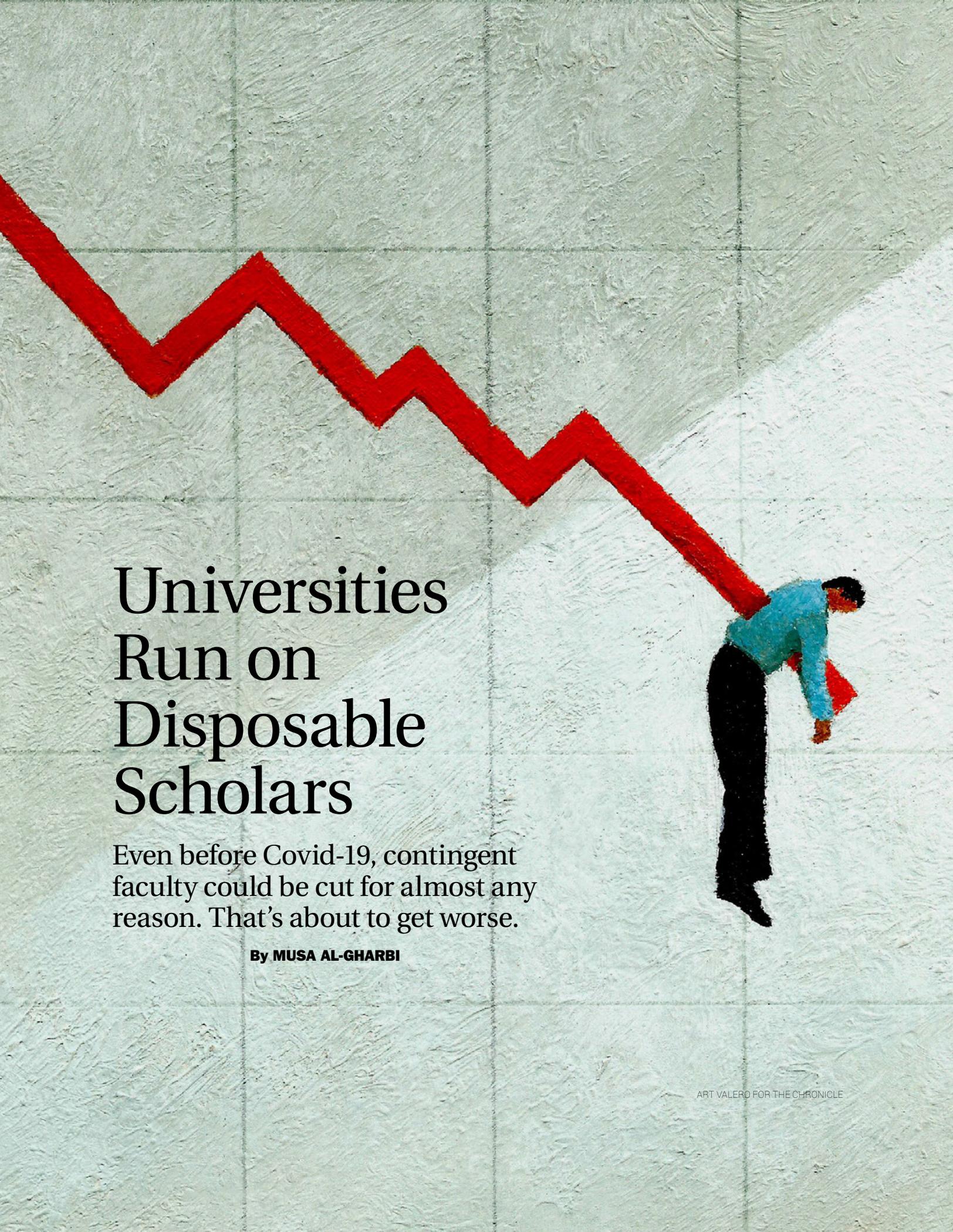
Finally, I hope departments can begin a dialogue among faculty members and graduate students about how to adjust dissertation formats or requirements. On Twitter, I've been arguing for this under the hashtag #Good-EnoughPhD. Inspired by David M. Perry's idea of a #PassFailNation, the hashtag points to arguments some scholars have made that simply extending tenure clocks is not enough (and may even widen inequalities); we also need to ratchet down expectations given the challenges academics are facing in producing research right now. The same is true for Ph.D. students. Changed expectations may take the form of being more open to three-paper dissertations in fields where monographs are the norm, for instance. As the disruption stretches on, it might also be necessary to be flexible about what constitutes an acceptable dissertation, by relaxing restrictions on co-authored work, or perhaps even shifting the number of interviews or hours of fieldwork expected to be completed for one's dissertation fieldwork.

These are challenging times for our universities. They didn't cause these problems, but they're better equipped than vulnerable graduate students are to weather this storm. It may not be possible to make all these changes immediately, but it is essential universities do not forget about graduate students.

To my fellow graduate students: Now is an excellent time to get involved in your graduate-student workers' union if your campus has one, or to organize with peers in your department or school, as some of our colleagues at Yale are doing. Our labor sustains universities' educational mission. Now it's time for universities to sustain us.

*Nadirah Farah Foley is a Ph.D. candidate in education at Harvard University.*

*Originally published March 31, 2020*

The background is a textured, light grey-green surface with faint vertical and horizontal lines, resembling a grid or graph paper. A thick, bright red zigzag line starts from the top left and trends downwards towards the right. At the end of this line, a man in a blue shirt and black pants is depicted carrying it, appearing to be in a state of physical strain or carrying a heavy burden. The overall style is that of a textured painting.

# Universities Run on Disposable Scholars

Even before Covid-19, contingent faculty could be cut for almost any reason. That's about to get worse.

By **MUSA AL-GHARBI**

ART VALERO FOR THE CHRONICLE

**C**risis like the continuing Covid-19 pandemic often serve to clarify the state of the societies and institutions they impact, highlighting dynamics that have long been present but have gone unnoticed or under-discussed. Higher ed is no exception. At colleges nationwide, institutional responses to the pandemic underscore just how much the ordinary lifestyles of tenured faculty are premised on the production and exploitation of “disposable scholars.”

The 2020 cohort of Ph.D.s is facing a nearly nonexistent job market. But of course, even before the coronavirus pandemic, most graduating Ph.D.s faced bleak prospects. National Science Foundation data suggest that 40 percent of recent Ph.D. graduates had no employment commitments of any kind (not in the private sector, nor as postdocs, nor as contingent or tenure-track faculty). Of those who did get commitments in academe, tenure-track appointments were relatively rare. According to the American Association of University Professors, nearly three-fourths of all

**Rather than reducing their numbers, many universities have increased their Ph.D. cohorts. Why?**

teaching jobs today are not tenure-eligible. As a new report by the American Federation of Teachers highlights, these non-tenure-track jobs tend to provide low wages, few benefits, and little job security

— with contracts extended or retracted capriciously from semester to semester. Many contingent faculty members, even those working full time, have to rely on government assistance just to make ends meet. Many are also saddled by immense debt, incurred in the hope that a terminal degree would provide a pathway to a stable and well-compensated academic job.

Contingent faculty members have very little academic freedom, as I discovered firsthand in my previous role at the University of Arizona. In my case, it was the

willful mischaracterization of my political and religious views by a Fox News contributor that served as the catalyst for my being dropped. However, colleges will cut contingent faculty members for almost any reason. They will eliminate them without hesitation in order to placate angry mobs or trustees, whether the attacks come from the right or the left. A single bad teaching review can result in one’s contract not being renewed, driving many to inflate grades. A disagreement with a tenured professor can result in the same, leading most to keep their heads down in such interactions. Contingent faculty generally have no right to vote on departmental issues, although they must live with committee decisions. And once you’re on the contingent-faculty track, it is difficult to get off.

**M**any appeal to fiscal pressures brought about by the 2008 financial crisis, or to the broader neoliberalization of higher ed, to explain the growing proportion of contingent versus tenure-eligible faculty members at colleges nationwide. The problem with these accounts is that they fail to explain why departments continue to produce Ph.D.s at a rate that far eclipses the number of faculty opportunities available. Why do departments consistently admit far more students than they could plausibly place?

This tendency is perhaps most pronounced at “non-elite” schools, although even Ivy League departments increasingly struggle to place their students. But rather than decreasing Ph.D. admissions to accommodate this reality, many have increased the size of their Ph.D. cohorts. Why?

The ugly truth is that departments refuse to reduce admits because their tenured and tenure-track professors want to teach graduate seminars on their topics of interest rather than teaching core and introductory courses to large classes of undergraduates. Achieving this requires two things.

First, it requires a sufficient number of graduate student “butts in seats” to justify the seminars tenured professors want to teach. Large cohorts of new Ph.D. aspirants help with that.

Second, it requires that someone else

teach the classes tenured and tenure-track professors are trying to get out of. Having large numbers of underemployed Ph.D.s provides departments with an easy way to cover these courses at little cost. Meanwhile, having large numbers of grad students provides tenured and tenure-track faculty with abundant TAs and graders for the classes they do teach — and RAs for their research projects — which leaves them with more time for the parts of their work they find most rewarding (while “others” attend to the more menial tasks). The publications and grants these faculty are able to secure, precisely as a result of this privilege, are then used to justify institutional inequality on meritocratic grounds: We deserve our advantages — look at our rate of production compared to everyone else’s!

**R**educing Ph.D. admissions would allow departments to better ensure that they can place the students they admit, and a scarcity of academic labor would put even contingent faculty in a stronger bargaining position with respect to wages, benefits, rights, and so on. But faculty members would have to cancel many of their pet seminars due to insufficient enrollment, and instead focus on teaching high-demand courses, largely to undergraduates and master’s students. They would have fewer TAs, RAs, and graders at their disposal — meaning they’d have to do more grunt work themselves. Consequently, they’d have less bandwidth to do the kinds of tasks that help them build up their CVs and climb the academic ladder.

The current dynamics create a pool of desperate academics who will take on extreme workloads for low pay, no benefits, and little security, all in the (typically vain) hope of working their way into a tenured or tenure-track job. It is horrible for them. Yet, whether they admit it or not, tenured and tenure-track academics like having this subordinate labor pool and are not particularly interested in doing without it. And most of them are not too keen on having many of those currently serving as post-docs, lecturers, adjuncts, and so on hired as

“peers” — with all the rights, protections, and status entailed thereby.

In striking such a posture, tenured and tenure-track professors exploit and perpetuate racial and gender inequalities within the academy: These faculty members are disproportionately white and/or male. Adjuncts, meanwhile, are disproportionately women and minorities. Universities are feeding students from historically marginalized and disadvantaged groups into the pipeline and saddling them with debt, knowing that most of them will not be able to find academic jobs. They use these students as cheap labor while they are enrolled, and brag about the growing diversity of their admitted students. Upon graduation, most are consigned to the reserve pool of labor. These workers are then sloughed off like so much dead weight at the whims of faculty, administrators, and even students.

Academics are happy to condemn “elites” for failing to do their share (apparently oblivious to the fact that most tenured or tenure-track faculty are, themselves, socioeconomic “elites”) — but are often hesitant to take concrete steps within their own communities and institutions to address the very injustices they condemn. Prolific scholars on feminism, antiracism, and other social-justice issues are often able to realize their high levels of productivity and achieve their status precisely by exploiting institutional inequalities. The same University of California system that requires “diversity statements” as a political litmus test for filtering out insufficiently woke job candidates also fired TAs en masse for organizing for better pay and benefits, while most professors stood idly by.

It is all well and good to think, say, or feel the right things; doing the right thing is far more important. And if academics cannot get our own house in order, why should anyone take seriously our prescriptions for the broader society?

*Musa al-Gharbi is a fellow in sociology at Columbia University.*

*Originally published May 1, 2020*

# Now — Yes, Now — Is the Time for Contingent Faculty to Organize

If we don't fight now, we may not get another chance.

By **JOSH BRAHINSKY AND ROXI POWER**



ADOLFO VALLE FOR THE CHRONICLE

**W**hen graduate-student workers at the University of California at Santa Cruz voted overwhelmingly in December to reject their statewide union contract and follow the West Virginia teachers' model of a wildcat strike, the precarious lives of academic workers became a news story once again. Fighting for a desperate-

ly needed cost of living adjustment, or COLA, strikers described the challenges they faced as low-income instructional workers living in or around Santa Cruz, one of the least affordable housing markets in the country. They described struggling with food insecurity and living in cars, in the woods, or on the street. They lamented an insecure future.

The COLA strike prompted many around campus and around the country to consider the depths of academic precarity today. However, the situation facing contingent faculty like us — we are lecturers at UCSC and activists in UC-AFT, the union for teaching faculty and librarians at the University of California — was largely absent from the media coverage. True, graduate students did ask us to join them: When could we strike? Why not just wildcat with them? But our response surprised many of them: We often feel too damned precarious — and too exhausted — to even fight anymore. And soon, we thought, but mostly did not say, many of you will be us.

Long before the virus, uncertainty was a given for contingent faculty. Many of us have little sense of our next teaching gig. We can barely sign a lease, let alone get a loan on a house. Yet, averaged across all higher-ed institutions, we're responsible for teaching the majority of college courses. In the University of California system,

**As we move through the viral abyss, it becomes clearer to us that collective worker action is exactly what's needed to protect teachers and teaching as we know it.**

we teach many of the smaller courses, so we know the names of our students. We listen to them as they struggle through the complexities of recent adulthood and university life. Many of us become mentors who disappear at the end of the quarter.

Needless to say, the economic collapse unleashed by the pandemic only adds to our sense of hopelessness. Together, we watched as the months-long graduate-student picket line and massive police presence gave way to the Covid-19 ghost town. Many of us are scared and depressed, scrambling to teach all our classes remotely while running elementary schools from our kitchens. We recede into our work

and focus only on our basic needs. It is all simply too much.

And yet, every day, as we move through the viral abyss, it becomes clearer to us that collective worker action is exactly what's needed to protect teachers and teaching as we know it. It is, indeed, dark out — and the isolated conditions we're working under now provide even more barriers to organizing our fellow contingent instructors and mobilizing resistance to the academic shock doctrine. But we have a wealth of history to draw on, a history of workers banding together — from recent adjunct organizing to the labor militancy of the 1930s — under equally difficult conditions. As it did for so many others in the past, our increased insecurity has now brought us to a moment where a strike, in the broadest sense of the word, will either melt into the darkness of the totally unimaginable, or emerge as the only way for us to make it out of this alive.

**C**ovid-19 very well could provide the opportunity for dismantling higher education as we know it. In the same way that it has already given the government an excuse to suspend environmental-protection regulations (and to consider suspending basic civil rights), the pandemic may soon mean the end of face-to-face public universities. We have already seen rapid change in the days since our classes went remote. Some students are fleeing, some demanding tuition reimbursement. Fewer students means more layoffs. For many faculty members, visas and immigration status are at risk. The 60 percent of our union members without university health care are especially vulnerable — anyone who gets sick is likely to go without pay. Plenty of us are teaching online from home while holding one child and feeding another. Some of this could stick.

But this isn't the way things have to be. We can follow another path out of this crisis. While both shocking and dismaying, individuals have, at times, rediscovered their humanity and strength in the context of collective suffering. Crisis can impel people, as Antonin Artaud once wrote, "to see themselves as they are. It causes the

mask to fall, reveals the lie, the slackness, baseness, and hypocrisy of our world ... it invites them to take, in the face of destiny, a superior and heroic attitude they would not have assumed without it.”

The crises we face now are no different. Covid-19 has clarified the strange paradox of corporate higher education: At the same time that our teaching is described by management as “an essential university function,” we, the flesh-and-blood teachers, have seldom felt more insecure. This has simultaneously intensified our need to fight for the soul of higher education and our sense that to succeed in doing so will require more than we can muster — organizing and acting in a way that, given everything we’ve already been through, seems radically unthinkable, impossible. But as Naomi Klein explains, crisis might “catalyze a kind of evolutionary leap” in which ideas and ways of caring for each other that seemed too radical last week are suddenly reasonable.

Workers made such a leap in the 1930s, when the world also seemed to be falling apart. They, too, knew the risks and felt the anxiety of challenging the status quo at such a tumultuous time; they also worried about losing their jobs, homes, and even their lives. And yet, workers, unemployed people, older citizens, and others took action. They took over state buildings, demanding food and basic needs, pressuring the government to implement reforms that, while still riddled with racist and sexist exclusions, secured unemployment insurance and Social Security for millions.

There were huge strikes throughout the 1930s, many of which — with some (in) famous exceptions — were successful (coal miners, truck drivers, cotton pickers, dockworkers). But the big gains came through the convergence of increased labor militancy, a widespread hostility toward big business, and the legitimation of unions through the National Labor Relations Board, all of which compelled companies like General Motors to come to the bargaining table.

The unabashed militancy in the face of crisis was driven largely by Communists, socialists, and syndicalists who led the

rebel unions of the Congress of Industrial Organizations to break away from the American Federation of Labor and develop innovative organizing strategies, including an increased willingness to strike. Through a combination of crisis, care, and militant action, workers won some of organized labor’s biggest gains to date. Many entered the world-historical cataclysm of the 1930s with next to nothing; they left with the eight-hour workday and the weekend.

In fact, many of us have a pretty good idea of what a strike by contingent faculty might accomplish. In 1999, UC-AFT went out of contract. Before mass adjunction, lecturer jobs were just as precarious as they are now, only less prevalent. Though the strike of October 2002 shut down most UC campuses for only two days, it won lecturers the possibility of the continuing appointment, which offers a modicum of security after 18 quarters of work in the same department. For many, continuing appointment provisions provided the first real chance to build a stable life in California — to this day, they remain among the strongest protections for long-term adjuncts in the country. After 18 years, however, only 24 percent of UC lecturers are continuing.

Our precarity as contingent faculty means that, unlike UCSC graduate workers, a wildcat strike probably isn’t in the cards for us. Nevertheless, the COLA strike continues to inspire us — protest is a learned art. We saw union democracy in action: members carefully weighing scary alternatives and ensuring that everyone could participate; striking grads combining beautiful paeans to an imagined future with concrete conversations about child care. We saw people with white, male, and faculty privilege absorb the risks of the picket line. We were invited, all of us, to envision a world where jobs are stable, workers live with dignity, and quality education is accessible to all.

We must carry on the fight of the COLA strikers and fend off the creeping evils of whatever new form the academy will take after the Covid-19 crisis. We must refuse to

dig our own graves by smoothing the transition to online formats that will replace many of us while wrecking much of what is still good in teaching. We must resist the intensification of surveillance that accom-

**Our organizing practices depend on gathering bodies together in space. Obviously, that's not an option right now. So we need to get creative.**

panies such a transition (it's no coincidence that the UCSC administration created a "tattle-bot" program inviting students to report instructors who modified instruction during the graduate-student strike). And we must return to the basics and fight for what should have been ours all

along: secure jobs, livable wages, and pay for the many forms of labor we provide.

Some folks say the best way to avoid a strike is to prepare for one. But how can we possibly prepare in these dire, isolated conditions?

A union connected only by remote devices poses unique, but by no means insurmountable, challenges. Some of the most engaged and well-attended meetings our union has held have occurred during this time of enforced social distancing: members regularly share personal stories and strategies for supporting one another; we

even used one such meeting to create a fund for colleagues who have lost their jobs. We know from experience that, at its core, preparing for a strike means opening ourselves up to change and be changed by one another. It means searching high and low for other lecturers, even those teaching across four other campuses. It means putting listening to others — and then listening some more — ahead of convincing them. It means building solidarity between contingent faculty with some job security and those without it. These are things we can do right now.

This moment, when "the normal" has broken apart, must be for us what Virginia Woolf called a "fallow period," a moment of stillness to clear the fields of our imagination, to replenish the nutrients in our intellectual and emotional soil. Then, the harvest. The COLA strikers invited us to begin this process — to heed the call of Klein, Artaud, and bygone militants; to make use of this moment when the barriers to change are in flux and our collective energies can be regathered and aimed toward the social good. Now we must see it through.

*Josh Brahinsky is a third-year lecturer at the University of California at Santa Cruz, a lecturer at San José State University, a researcher at Stanford University, and an activist in the UC-AFT. Roxi Power is an editor, poet, and continuing lecturer at UCSC, where she has taught and been a labor activist with UC-AFT for over 20 years.*

*Originally published April 24, 2020*

# Prominent Scholars Threaten to Boycott Colleges That Don't Support Contingent Faculty During Pandemic

By MEGAN ZAHNEIS



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY THE CHRONICLE

Among those taking part in the boycott are, clockwise from top left: Kimberlé Crenshaw, Judith Butler, Naomi Klein, Harold Varmus, Donna Haraway, and Seyla Benhabib, with Nell Irvin Painter, center.

To account for the effects of the pandemic on scholars' professional and personal lives, hundreds of institutions have extended their tenure clocks, giving junior faculty members extra time to prepare their dossiers. A similar courtesy ought to be afforded to their non-tenure-track and graduate-student colleagues, say a group of prominent academics.

More than 70 scholars are among the initial signatories to an academic-solidarity

statement that promises not to accept invitations — for speaking engagements, conferences, and workshops — at institutions that do not “include non-tenure-track faculty and graduate workers in extensions of fixed-term contracts.”

“All academic workers deserve the relief of knowing that they have job security and the opportunity to complete their projects in more favorable conditions,” the statement reads.

Joining the boycott, which will last at least through the 2020-21 academic year, are the novelist and creative-writing professor Zadie Smith, the philosophers Judith Butler and Seyla Benhabib, the race-studies scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, the cultural theorists Donna Haraway and Naomi Klein, the historians Nell Irvin Painter and Samuel Moyn, and the Nobel Prize-winning scientist Harold E. Varmus.

Premilla Nadasen, a professor of history at Barnard College, is among the signatories. A scholar whose work focuses on labor policy and organizing, Nadasen hopes the statement will raise awareness of the inequities in the academic labor force.

“As with so much of what’s happened around this pandemic, the fallout has impacted different communities to different degrees. And those who are precarious workers, those without economic security, are the ones who have been hardest hit. We have to acknowledge that,” Nadasen said.

Adom Getachew, an assistant professor of political science at the University of Chicago, was among the junior faculty members who drafted the statement. It was spurred, she said, by “the sense that this crisis, like the 2008 crisis, would exacerbate inequalities between faculty on the tenure track and those not on the tenure track.”

Getachew said she and her colleagues sought and incorporated feedback from tenured faculty members into the statement. A majority of scholars the group contacted agreed to be initial signatories, which she found “heartening.” “I think it speaks to the growing awareness of the problem of hierarchy in the academic work force and a growing sense of solidarity across the tenure lines,” Getachew said.

She said she doesn’t expect the statement alone to affect administrators’ decisions, but hopes it will add leverage to actions being taken by advocacy groups or unions on individual campuses. Academics can request that their institutions be added to a public list of those not compliant with the statement.

The website set up for the statement links to a handful of other petitions pledging support to non-tenure-track and graduate workers. But Getachew said her group’s effort marks a “step forward” from those

campaigns because it “goes beyond a simple statement of solidarity to express some willingness to take action on the part of signatories.”

Kenneth W. Warren, a professor of English at Chicago who offered feedback to Getachew and others on a draft of the statement, said he was “drawn to the actionable part” of the effort. Even so, he said, the boycott is “maybe more symbolic than we would like.” That’s because, he reasons, invitations to give talks and seminars will dry up as departments’ discretionary funding takes a hit.

Despite that, Warren said, it’s important for senior scholars to express support for their colleagues.

“The more voices that we have, particularly senior voices, drawing attention to this issue, the more likely we are going to be able to place appropriate pressure on institutions,” Warren said. “It just seemed inappropriate for us to be accepting funds from institutions who weren’t making a priority of ensuring that their teaching staff at all levels have the best opportunities to weather this crisis over the next few years.”

Warren said it was telling that junior faculty members, many of whom benefit directly from tenure-clock extensions, were the primary authors of the statement.

“One could have imagined a response where the tenure-track faculty whose situations were at the center of the initial response by many institutions to extend tenure clocks could have said, ‘Well, great. Our needs have been acknowledged by the university,’” Warren said. Instead, tenure-track academics have been “more upfront on these issues” than senior scholars.

Getachew said the statement, which will be circulated widely this week, is “a small part of addressing a much bigger crisis.”

“Higher education as an industry is in severe crisis,” Getachew said. “It was before the Covid-19 pandemic, and that crisis will only exacerbate the condition of higher education in this country.”

*Megan Zahneis is a reporting fellow for The Chronicle.*

*Originally published April 28, 2020*

# Covid-19 Changes the Calculus of Grad-Student Activism

By MEGAN ZAHNEIS AND VIMAL PATEL



Columbia University graduate students circulated an online flier listing their demands.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY THE CHRONICLE

**B**efore the coronavirus upended higher education, graduate-student activists at the University of California at Santa Cruz were waging an unrelenting wildcat grading strike against the administration. They wanted a cost-of-living adjustment of \$1,400 a month to account for living in an extremely expensive city like Santa Cruz. Protesters blocked the campus's two main entrances, causing classes to be canceled, and car horns blared constantly from passing motorists who supported their demands. Many protesters were fired, and the demonstrations spread to other University of California campuses, attracting national attention.

Now, of course, students face a very different obstacle to attending classes. As the Covid-19 pandemic took hold and states issued stay-at-home orders, the teaching assistants found themselves without physical gathering spots where they could support one another through a difficult time. The momentum of the strike — and the issues at stake — had shifted. As of this week, almost all of the 80 or so Santa Cruz graduate students who had been withholding grades decided to submit them. As the monthslong grading strike effectively ended, students began trying to negotiate their jobs back.

The calculus of activism and agitation for change has shifted, not only in Santa Cruz but across academe. Graduate students nationwide are finding their positions more precarious as their institutions face financial deficits in the millions, as the job market dries up and hiring is frozen, and as they face their own financial and personal burdens brought on by the pandemic.

At the same time, the work of labor activism has become more challenging. Graduate students' traditional forms of protest are hampered by social-distancing protocols and empty campuses — picket lines aren't easily replicated on Zoom — and they worry that alternative methods they've devised make them vulnerable to retaliation. All the while, the universities they're pressuring for support are operating on bootstrapped budgets. But one expert looking at historic precedent thinks they may come out ahead.

### **A Different Form of Protest**

Nathan Xavier Osorio, a first-generation grad student in literature at Santa Cruz with about \$125,000 in student-loan debt, had been among the 80 or so teaching assistants withholding grades in early March. At the end of the month, as the pandemic surged, he was formally fired.

"Instead of meeting with us to bargain in good faith, the university dealt punitive measures that further shunt us into precarity while a public-health emergency surges and the economy shuts down," he said. "I was lucky enough to be able to secure another job as a graduate researcher with a sympathetic center on campus, but many of my peers have had to go on unemployment in order to keep food on the table, not to mention paying their high rent."

University leaders have consistently argued that in not negotiating with the unauthorized strikers they were, in fact, respecting the collective-bargaining process. "It is extremely disappointing to us that we have to take this action," wrote Scott Hernandez-Jason, a university spokesman, in an email last week, "but we ultimately cannot retain graduate students as employees who will not fulfill their responsibilities as teaching assistants or graduate-student instructors."

But the activism, organizers say, isn't over; it's just taking a different form. Activists across the UC system started Strike University, a collection of online classes and teach-ins with titles like "Organize Your Department" and "The Precariat and Popular Power."

A similar effort is underway at Columbia University, where a group of graduate students began a labor and rent strike on April 17. Among their demands are that the university increase their summer stipends to \$6,000, extend funding and employment eligibility and time-to-degree requirements for one year, and cancel rent for university housing.

Organizers told *The Chronicle* on Wednesday that nearly 300 graduate students had joined the action, and a website set up for the strike linked to several letters of support from faculty members. Meanwhile, organizers have set up a roster of

teach-ins on Zoom, including one session led by UC strikers.

At Columbia, the strike comes amid a long history of fractious relationships between the union and the university. Members of the Graduate Student Union, which is represented by the United Auto Workers, held a weeklong strike in 2018, two years after Columbia activists helped overturn a National Labor Relations Board decision forbidding private-college unions to engage in collective bargaining.

While the university and the union have been “actively negotiating” for more than a year, a Columbia representative said, the current action exists outside of union boundaries. “The demands from these students concern hardships related to the pandemic and are outside the scope of official bargaining discussions,” the representative wrote in an email to *The Chronicle*. “Columbia is supporting its graduate students in a variety of ways during this crisis, including a \$3,000 enhanced stipend for qualifying Ph.D. candidates.”

Danielle Carr, a doctoral student in anthropology at Columbia and an organizer, said that those measures weren’t enough, and that her cohort’s activism reflected a larger issue.

“The impetus for organizing right now with this degree of passion is that we have seen the future, and it looks like the long precaritization and the neoliberalization of the university from the past,” Carr said, “but a hell of a lot worse because” it’s “refracted through the shock-doctrine moment that we’re in, when the university can push through things that it’s been trying to do for a very long time.”

Carr’s fellow organizer, David E. Silverberg, a Ph.D. student in Columbia’s religion department, concurred. “This isn’t just about what’s happening during Covid,” Silverberg said. “It’s also about what will continue to happen for the next several years, unless there is something done immediately to show that we’re not going to just accept austerity measures that drastically reduce the quality of life of us, faculty, and our students.”

But the challenges of striking in an online environment are many. Teaching strikes of-

ten rely on visibility, and with classes taking place virtually — and, in many cases, asynchronously — it can be difficult to discern whether or not they’re actually happening. Strikers posted on Twitter an email from a Columbia administrator raising that very question.



“We understand that you may not have met the students in your course as scheduled yesterday, Monday, April 27,” the email, from Carmen DeLeon, assistant provost for academic appointments, read. “Please let us know if you did, in fact, meet with the class, or, if you did not, the reason for your absence. You should know that you will not be paid if you missed the class because you were on strike.”

While shuttered campuses and the move online can get in the way of strikers’ visibility, some of them think their inscrutability works to their advantage. “Columbia’s inability to guarantee to its students that the university is even functioning is ... one of the reasons that we are striking,” Silverberg wrote in an email to *The Chronicle*.

The Columbia and Santa Cruz protesters aren't alone in their efforts. At Villanova University, graduate students in the philosophy and theology departments are making their own demands, which include an additional health-care stipend and continuous summer pay, and circulating a statement of solidarity. Social-sciences and humanities students at Princeton University are asking their administrators for time-to-degree extensions and emergency funding. And at the University of Miami, a group of graduate students wrote a petition asking for more funding and for university executives to take pay cuts.

### **Continued Surge in Activism Is Likely**

It's difficult to tell whether efforts like the ones at Columbia, Princeton, and Villanova mark a rise in graduate-student activism, said William A. Herbert, executive director of the National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education and the Professions, at the City University of New York's Hunter College. But if history offers any indication, Herbert said, a surge in activism is likely.

It's true that the 2008 economic crash predicated "an attack on unionization," said Herbert, including the revocation of collective-bargaining rights for faculty members at the University of Wisconsin. But the closer comparison with the current crisis, Herbert said, is the Great Depression, which saw a "huge spike" in labor activism of all stripes, including the first widespread instances of student activism. The trend before the pandemic was also "a tremendous amount of organizing" among graduate students, Herbert added, including mass unionization efforts between 2013 and 2019.

Herbert noted that the federal Cares Act requires that any nonprofit organization

that receives a loan remain neutral during any sort of union drive, which would give graduate-student organizers a major advantage, but the NLRB is also considering a rule that would prevent graduate students at private colleges from unionizing.

In the meantime, Herbert said, activists will have to get creative to do their work from inside their homes. The UC students' Strike University is one example of that innovation, but it doesn't come without risks, Herbert warned. For example, if protesting students use their university-issued computers to organize, they open themselves up to possible surveillance by the institution. Recorded demonstrations, including teach-ins, could be weaponized and manipulated.

Despite the risks, Herbert sees possibilities. "Everyone is learning as we go along," Herbert said, "so it wouldn't surprise me that creative people will be creative and will come up with other ways of using technology in a positive way."

In fact, Covid-19 could usher in a new era for graduate-student activism. While he's leery of making sweeping predictions as our understanding of the pandemic and its effects shifts by the day, Herbert envisions "a major paradigm shift in American history toward a much greater understanding of the common good and that the common good may become a central component of all forms of collective bargaining and treatment toward each other.

"That's a hope. That's not a guarantee," Herbert said. "But I think that there's definitely that possibility."

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*Originally published April 30, 2020*

# The New Tenured Radicals

After years of standing on the sidelines in the fight for adjuncts' rights, more tenured professors are entering the fray. Are they too late?

By EMMA PETTIT



**S**eth Kahn remembers saying some pretty inflammatory things about higher ed's reliance on contingent labor into a microphone.

Years ago, at a conference, composition instructors were filming what would become *Con Job*, a 2014 documentary about the institutional marginalization of non-tenure-track faculty members. They needed talking heads. Kahn, then an associate professor of English at West Chester University of Pennsylvania, was game.

He played the hits. He talked about neoliberalism, the fear of being fired or nonrenewed for speaking up, the sheer obviousness of the problem: "Everybody knows." He did a good job. Kahn's specialty is the rhetoric of activism.

Then, he walked out of the interview room and smacked himself on the forehead. No, really. In that moment, Kahn said, he realized that if he actually meant anything he'd said, he needed to get to work.

Kahn is one of several tenured faculty members who've had such moments of clarity, albeit most without the head-smack. Together, they formed *Tenure for the Common Good*, an attempt to organize tenured professors nationwide to fight for decent pay and working conditions for their less-privileged colleagues. What began as a loose conglomeration has taken formal shape in recent months. Its message is one of urgency and moral responsibility: "We just don't have time to waste feeling powerless," a statement on the website says, "when we haven't exercised the power we have."

Right now feels like the right time for a reason. While tenured professors have typically stood by silently as their nontenured colleagues advocated for themselves on the national stage, they have watched their own kind dwindle. Positions are remaining unfilled. Tenure lines are getting pruned. There's still the same service work to do, but fewer people to do it, and those who remain shoulder the burden. They've also mentored their own graduate students as those scholars have braved an anemic academic job market and felt the sting of not being able to land good positions.

And today, as a global pandemic has devastated budgets and led college leaders to freeze

hiring and furlough even tenured professors, the cause seems especially urgent.

The structural changes that preceded the pandemic helped set the stage for those austerity measures, and manufactured a growing — if uneven, slow, some would say glacial — recognition among the tenured that relying on contingent labor hurts everyone, activists and higher-education researchers say. "We're all on a raft," said Talia Schaffer, an English professor at Queens College and the CUNY Graduate Center of the City University of New York, who serves on *Tenure for the Common Good's* executive committee. Pieces are falling off, she said, and "we're sort of clinging to the last, the central bit, of wood." It's not sustainable.

Either everyone works together to save each other, the thinking goes, or everyone sinks.

**O**ver the past four decades, the academic profession's traditional model has eroded. As the higher-education scholars Adrianna Kezar, Tom DePaola, and Daniel T. Scott put it in their 2019 book, *The Gig Academy*, for years universities have simultaneously "expanded the number of doctoral degrees granted while constricting the number of stable academic jobs," creating a system in which low wages and precarity "are standard terms of employment for the least and most educated workers alike."

Contingent faculty now dominate the profession. More than half of faculty members at four-year public institutions are off the tenure track, and that rises to about 66 percent at four-year private nonprofit institutions, according to data from the fall of 2017 compiled by *The Chronicle*. At two-year public colleges, it's about 80 percent. Of all faculty, more than 40 percent at four-year and two-year colleges don't have full-time positions.

There's a gulf between those on and off the tenure track. Non-tenure-track faculty members, especially part-timers, are typically restricted from designing curricu-

**"We've seen the adjuncts as nobody. And that needs to change."**

lum and have little access to shared governance. They're paid less and subject to the ever-shifting winds of departmental priorities and student demand.

Kezar and her co-authors draw strong parallels between those jobs and more commonly thought of gig work. "Whether one needs a car ride to the airport in two minutes or an instructor to teach one semester of English in two weeks," they write, "it can be delivered cost-effectively only if the labor required exists in sufficient oversupply that someone can always be mobilized on demand."

Those bifurcated working conditions were apparent to Maria Maisto, who was working as an adjunct professor in Ohio in 2008, as the economy was cratering. In early 2009, Maisto co-founded New Faculty Majority, a national advocacy group. The Great Recession helped to catalyze her activism. But not everyone's.

Maisto, who is on the advisory board of Tenure for the Common Good, said that when she started her activism, she accepted that most tenured faculty members would be indifferent at best and hostile at worst to her cause. She'd hear from tenured professors who believed in the cause and thus felt like loners in their departments or on their campuses. Empathy wasn't the norm.

How much tenured professors have cared, historically, about their contingent colleagues, is difficult to measure. Everyone knows the caricature: the older, typically white, typically male full professor whose non-tenure-track colleagues escape his vision, who still believes merit rises to the top and those who fail to land tenure-track jobs lack work ethic, intelligence, or both.

"In general, we've seen the adjuncts as nobody," said Aaron Barlow, an English professor at CUNY's New York City College of Technology who is on Tenure for the Common Good's executive council. "And that needs to change."

Others think the stereotype has been overblown. Jennifer Ruth, a professor of film studies at Portland State University and another member of the group's advisory board, said she can't think of anyone she knows who is indifferent to the plight of their contingent colleagues. Many tenured colleagues

are quiet, she said, because they don't know how to help, or how to enter the discussion without becoming targets on social media.

Regardless, there's consensus among activists that tenured faculty, as a class, haven't waded far enough into the fight, considering they have labor protections that the average worker does not. Stand-out exceptions exist — names that everyone knows — but they are still exceptions.

**M**eanwhile, over the past decade, groups like the New Faculty Majority have established themselves. They lobbied Congress and publicized the stories of "freeway fliers" who commute from one job to another. Social media brought lots of those narratives to the fore and made it harder for tenured professors to wear blinders, Maisto said. News stories, like that of a homeless adjunct who lives out of her Volvo sedan, exploded. In recent years, the movement has changed to focus less on victim narratives, said Joe Berry, author of *Reclaiming the Ivory Tower: Organizing Adjuncts to Change Higher Education*. Now, he said, the message is, "We deserve not charity, but solidarity."

Tenured faculty also couldn't ignore the groundswell of contingent-faculty organizing, including that of graduate-student workers. The Service Employees International Union started what became the Faculty Forward movement several years ago and has unionized at least 57,000 faculty members and graduate-student workers on 60 campuses, according to its website.

Anecdotally, Kahn, a Tenure for the Common Good leader, and others have seen evidence of an attitude shift among the tenured. Five years ago, if an exploitative job ad for an adjunct got posted on a listserv, it would be Kahn and maybe a couple other people who'd respond to say, "This looks like a dangerous trap." But over time, he said, he's seen 20, 30, sometimes 40 people publicly challenge such ads.

**"Some of my friends in the fight will say, First, do no harm. And I feel like there's no way not to."**

It's still a very small cadre, he said, but it's growing.

Not every tenure-tracker has made common cause with adjuncts. Some see the two groups' aims as fundamentally incongruent. "This mushy liberal stuff that we are all in this together, nicey-nice, just isn't true," a New York University professor told *The Chronicle* in 2013. That academic year, arts-and-science professors there decided to deny their full-time colleagues who worked off the tenure track the ability to vote in faculty meetings.

Some professors at New York University thought extending the vote to full-time contingent faculty members was a risk, because the tenured and tenure-track ranks were already shrinking. They worried about their voice weakening. For a long time, a common attitude was that resources for the two groups came from the same pie, Berry said. A bigger piece to one meant a smaller piece to the other.

But now, the sense is growing that their fates are tied. Tenured faculty members have begun to understand that contingency threatens the integrity of the profession, said Maisto.

Even if tenured professors might not pay attention to the adjuncts who walked their hallways, they couldn't help but notice the fates of their graduate students, who were being sent into a bottlenecked academic-jobs market to compete for slimmer pickings. They started to connect the dots.

The reliance on contingent faculty also started to affect the everyday life of the tenure-track faculty member, said Paula M. Krebs, executive director of the Modern Language Association, and an advisory board member to Tenure for the Common Good.

She gave an example. Say you're in a department that's dropped from 50 full-time, tenure-track faculty to, say, 30, over time. It's not like that was the plan. At first, the department used a contingent faculty member to replace someone on maternity leave. And then it was a way to do more composition teaching. And then it was a way to teach a language that didn't have enough enrollment. And then. And then. And then.

After a while, the department has far fewer tenured or tenure-track professors, but curricula must still be developed. Students must be advised. Committees must be

filled. Those who are left have felt their own service workload grow heavier, Krebs said.

Suddenly, you start to look around and say, "how did this happen?"

**C**arolyn Betensky was one of those professors who had other things on her mind.

An English professor at the University of Rhode Island, Betensky had completed her doctorate in 1997. She became so busy trying to find a job that she didn't pay much attention to the bigger picture, she wrote in an essay for *Inside Higher Ed*. She thought about her own odds, and they weren't good. She landed a three-year position that turned into a six-year position and then finally got an assistant professorship at Rhode Island, where she then channeled her energy into getting tenure.

"It's embarrassing to admit this," she wrote, "but even though I disapproved of the treatment of contingent faculty, I just wasn't paying attention to the way the naturalization of their exploitation was taking place concurrently with my own professionalization."

She also never thought of herself as having a say in the matter, because no one asked her. Like many, she felt helpless to stop a train that seemed to have left the station long ago.

Over the years, Betensky watched adjunct faculty members and graduate students organize and find creative ways to tell their stories. She noted the conspicuous absence of a tenured faculty group that was dedicated to resolving the problem. "Why is it," she wrote, "that those of us who occupy relatively privileged positions are the readiest to accept that this is just the way things are?"

"Have we really given this battle our all?"

No, Betensky decided. She knew other people were embarrassed that tenured faculty hadn't entered this struggle. They hadn't seen any groups trying to denaturalize what has come to seem natural, she said in an interview.

She started talking about creating such a group, and Kahn and Schaffer were soon on board, with Barlow and Rachel Sagner Buurma, an associate professor of English at Swarthmore College, later rounding out the executive committee. The committee is all English professors, but the ad-

visory board includes scholars in other disciplines, and the group wants to affect change across academe.

Betensky is a project person. Kahn is a super-extrovert whose department photo shows him at a protest. And Schaffer wanted to feel less helpless. She'd seen her graduate students — who, she says, are far more qualified than she or her cohort were — get “destroyed” by the collapse of the academic job market.

“I don't want to be lying awake crying about this,” she said. “I want to be doing something.”

In 2017, Betensky established a Tenure for the Common Good Facebook group to post ideas. It began as just a loose assortment of people who wanted to stop looking away, Betensky said. And it was people who wanted to work alongside the contingent faculty who'd already been in the fray, sticking their necks out, Betensky said. “This isn't a savior thing.”

Striking the balance can be tricky. The activism of tenured professors should not overshadow what contingent faculty members are doing, said Roopika Risam, an associate professor of secondary and higher education and English at Salem State University, who serves on the advisory board.

But even as their influence may have waned, tenured professors have resources and can wield power that non-tenure-track faculty members don't and can't. In the beginning, Tenure for the Common Good lurched from idea to idea, serendipitously, Kahn said. One of the first was to try to persuade U.S. News & World Report to change how it conducts its best-college rankings. Its “faculty resources” category weights faculty salaries much more heavily than it does the ratio of part-time to full-time faculty.

They petitioned to switch that balance. Those faculty-salary numbers don't reflect the majority of college instructors, the group wrote. Contingent instructors are “underpaid, exploited, and exhausted.” A university that mistreats its employees this way is not giving its students a good education, no matter how much it might pay the few remaining tenure-track faculty members, the petition says.

They sent the petition to U.S. News and got a meeting, but no changes. In an email, Robert Morse, chief data strategist at U.S.

News, said the organization tried to collect comparable information on part-time faculty salaries a few years ago, but “a very large number” of institutions either didn't have the information or weren't able to collect it uniformly. “Our methodology has been evolving for more than three decades,” he added, “and we make updates based on careful, thoughtful analysis and consultations with experts in the field.”

Still, the petition got over 1,000 signatures, which was encouraging. Members of the group offered a roundtable and workshop at the 2018 and 2020 MLA conventions. They wrote an article in *Profession*, describing their goals. They met with Krebs to discuss ways the MLA could help, and together, developed a plan to train external reviewers to assess institutions' treatment of contingent faculty members.

**T**he group is also trying to create a Fair Labor Seal for academe. It'd be a kind of prize for which colleges would compete, or a designation for which they could apply. It'd signal that the institution adheres to good labor practices in hiring and employment, the group's website says. The idea came from a *Guardian* article, in which the writer Alissa Quart juxtaposed the \$1.8 billion donation to the Johns Hopkins University from Michael Bloomberg, the former New York mayor, with the lived reality of some adjuncts: getting meals from their university's foodbank, occasionally donating plasma for money. “A fair-labor label would affect colleges where they live,” she wrote, “their public image.”

And when it became clear that the global coronavirus pandemic would capsize higher education, at least for the foreseeable future, Tenure for the Common Good saw a place to intervene. The group made a list of what institutions could and should do to give the contingent faculty the same resources and protections that tenure-track faculty members have. “Do not require contingent faculty teaching at multiple institutions to use multiple videoconferencing apps or technology platforms,” reads one. “Suspend student evaluation of teaching for this semester” is another.

That's one use of Tenure for the Common

Good: sharing practical strategies, said Robin Sowards, an organizer with United Steelworkers who sits on the advisory board. Lots of tenured faculty don't know what they can do, or they're fatalistic, he said. But there are concrete steps achievable by everyone: Plan out sabbaticals so that contingent faculty have a consistent level of work. Give them the maximum amount of warning time, if there's going to be a decline in enrollment.

And the group is a way to signal to non-tenure-track people that tenured people care, said Schaffer, of Queens College. "This shouldn't be a war for scarce resources," she said. "This should be all of us fighting to expand the pool of resources."

**O**f course, it's one thing to raise the consciousness of tenured professors that their adjunct colleagues need their support. It's another to show them that the system may ultimately undermine everyone. And it's a step further to get them to make sacrifices necessary to change it.

Even when the will is there, pleasing everyone is not a given. Ruth, the Portland State professor, ran for English-department chair on the platform that she'd fight for tenure lines and create only more good jobs. It meant doing things like saying no when someone wanted to hire an adjunct so he could finish his book. It meant saying no to giving out adjunct sections to a faculty member's spouse or girlfriend. It meant trying to reassure the existing contingent faculty members who, understandably, feared for their jobs, even though Ruth did not eliminate them.

Within two years of work — work that included cajoling a few faculty members to relinquish sweetheart deals and up their course loads — she and her allies in the department created three new tenure lines. Her strategy worked.

But she could also claim "a whole army of new enemies," and none were administrators, she wrote in a post for the blog *Remaking the University*. They were some of the people who'd been her closest friends.

In the beginning, it all felt righteous. Toward the end, it got ugly. Ruth ended up moving to the film-studies department. She'd make the effort again. But it came at

quite a steep personal cost.

"Some of my friends in the fight will say, First, do no harm," Ruth said. "And I feel like there's no way not to."

There are other giants to fell, outside of-office walls. Even if every tenured professor got on board tomorrow, they would face a steep, maybe insurmountable, uphill battle. The tenured rank's stature has been chipped away for more than 40 years. Professors were generally slow to take up arms, and now there are proportionately fewer of them. Tenure itself has been weakened, many argue. Its swan song has been sung time and time again.

The long-term effects of Covid-19 are still a mystery, but as colleges freeze hiring and budgets bottom out, it doesn't seem to spell good news for either precarious workers or tenure trackers.

And there's also a left-wing argument that tenure itself promotes unjust labor practices.

"As long as some of us have something to defend that others never had in the first place, it will be difficult to build the kind of solidarity that leads to lasting and substantive change," writes Greg Afinogenov, an assistant professor of history at Georgetown University, in an essay for *The Chronicle Review*. In the broad push for economic justice, both "the need and the justification for academic hierarchy will fall away."

Afinogenov's essay, predictably, raised some hackles from tenured professors. Kahn had a milder take.

It seems like Afinogenov wants tenured faculty to stop claiming special protections for themselves only, Kahn wrote on his blog. And Kahn agrees. When the tenured claim these privileges and don't fight for them for other workers, they sound like they're declaring themselves exceptional, he wrote.

Tenure for the Common Good wants to retool what tenure has come to signify. Instead of being merely a mark of individual achievement, it would represent a sense of responsibility to the profession.

That won't be easy to achieve, especially now. Nothing is guaranteed. They feel they have to try.

*Emma Pettit is a staff reporter at The Chronicle.*

*Originally published April 23, 2020*

# Faculty Members Fear Pandemic Will Weaken Their Ranks

By MEGAN ZAHNEIS

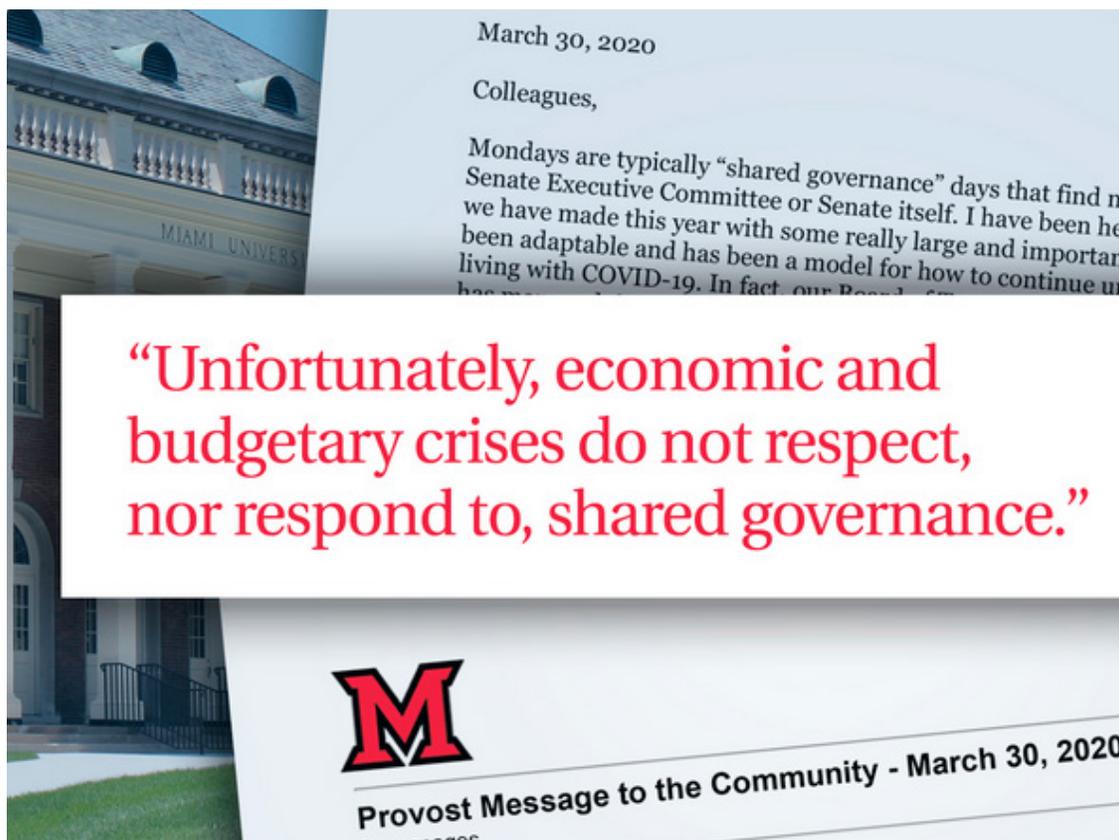


PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY THE CHRONICLE

**T**he scenarios Christopher A. Makaroff was asking department chairs to consider were stark.

Makaroff, dean of Miami University's College of Arts and Science, recently sent a memo asking the college's department chairs to revise their course schedules for the fall, as part of "contingency planning" to account for the economic

impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

Among the possibilities Makaroff's memo raised were a 20-percent drop in enrollment and teaching-load increases for faculty members. He also asked the chairs to create two schedules: one that included half as many visiting assistant professors as the department currently held, and one with no visiting assistant professors at all.

The memo rattled faculty members at Miami and drew consternation from those elsewhere who heard about it, including Michael Bérubé, immediate past chair of Pennsylvania State University's Faculty Senate and a former president of the Modern Language Association. Actions of the sort outlined in Makaroff's memo would be "way pre-emptive," Bérubé said.

"This looked opportunistic, and I'm sure there's going to be places either increasing teaching loads or relying more on contingent faculty, where the motto is going to be, 'Don't let a good crisis go to waste,'" he said.

Carole Johnson, Miami's interim director of news and communications, wrote in an email that the memo was hypothetical, designed to generate discussion among department chairs and "certainly not intended to imply anything about Miami's future."

Nor was the memo unusual in the measures it proposed, Johnson said. "We imagine you will find similar contingency planning at most nationally ranked universities," she wrote.

Covid-19 is being described as both a crisis and an opportunity for higher education. But how "opportunity" is defined depends on where one stands in the academic hierarchy. While some hope the pandemic provides a chance to reverse troubling trends toward the adjunctification and casualization of academic labor, administrators may see it as a different sort of opportunity, to realign institutional priorities or exert greater authority over their faculties.

Indeed, as colleges brace for a drop in fall enrollment and other financial hits, a crowdsourced list of institutions that have announced hiring freezes has more than 250 entries. Academics on social media have described having job offers rescinded. And in explaining hiring freezes as necessary to avoid layoffs, administrators have sparked fears among non-tenure-track faculty members that their jobs will soon be eliminated.

Central Washington University even declared financial exigency as a result of the pandemic, a step that would put it in a position to lay off even tenured faculty members with impunity. Its president told faculty members in a memo that he does not intend to lay off any faculty members.

Amid such maneuvers, professional organizations are watching for violations of shared-governance principles. The American Association of University Professors, for one, warned that "principles of academic governance apply no matter how exigent the situation."

At Miami University, another memo, this one sent to the faculty by the provost, Jason W. Osborne, seemed to assert the opposite. "Unfortunately, economic and budgetary crises do not respect, nor respond to, shared governance," Osborne wrote in the March 30 memo. "They happen, without our consent or input, and we must respond decisively to avoid even greater problems."

Cathy Wagner, a professor of creative writing and the president of the campus's AAUP chapter, disputed that notion. "Decisions do need to be made to change things in this crisis," she said, "but that doesn't mean that they can't happen in a way that's informed by faculty contributions."

In an emailed statement to *The Chronicle*, Osborne said his original memo had been "apparently misunderstood, as it was intended to be an affirmation of our shared governance in these uncertain times." He added that Miami's University Senate "continues to meet and fulfill its critically important role in the university's shared-governance process."

### **A Temporary Setback?**

Faculty critics are also concerned that the pandemic will be used as a rationale to further undermine the traditional faculty model. A statement by the Tenure for the Common Good group offers 20 recommendations for administrators, including that they "resist using the current crisis as an opportunity to exploit contingency further by hiring more contingent faculty into precarious positions."

**"Principles of academic governance apply no matter how exigent the situation."**

Among the recommendations, “that one jumps out,” said Bérubé, a member of the group’s advisory board, “because that’s disaster capitalism 101.” It speaks, he said, to a “mentality that sees this as an opportunity for systemic structural change that isn’t actually warranted by the underlying economics.”

That viewpoint is not exclusive to administrators. In a recent interview with *The Chronicle Review*, Robert Zemsky, a professor of higher education at the University of Pennsylvania, argued that colleges with many adjunct faculty members were in a better position to respond to the pandemic by eliminating “clutter” in their budgets. “Presidents will have to ask,” he said, “Is this the moment when?”

Bérubé, for his part, expects the next year and a half to be difficult. But he says he’s taking his cues not from academic soothsayers who predict wholesale changes in higher ed, but from financial advisers who promise that the pandemic won’t prompt a repeat of the 2008 recession.

“I can understand the short-term panic, believe me. If you take a snapshot right

**“I really hope that any institution in higher education that puts things in place for next year does so in the spirit that they would be temporary.”**

now, it looks like a systemic collapse,” Bérubé said. But with economic recovery in mind, he added, “I really hope that any institution in higher education that puts things in place for next year does so in the spirit that they would be temporary.”

Adrianna J. Kezar, co-director of the Pulfias Center for Higher Education at the University of Southern California, issued the same warning. “You don’t want to have responses in terms of a future faculty role that are unthoughtful, short term, and just a reaction to a pandemic,” she said. Instead, she hopes for renewed investment in full-time faculty members and an appreciation of the

labor involved in online learning.

As faculty members are asked to take on greater teaching, advising, and administrative responsibilities, faculty development and retention “will be more important to institutional resilience — survival — than ever before,” Kiernan Mathews, executive director and principal investigator of the Harvard Graduate School of Education’s Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education, wrote on Twitter.



Mathews recognizes that advice might seem counterintuitive. “It sounds absurd, perhaps, to say, ‘You need to invest.’ They can’t invest in anything right now,” Mathews acknowledged. But he said retention and development costs pale in comparison to those an institution incurs by hiring a new faculty member.

If colleges fail to revise their tenure, promotion, and reappointment processes to account for the pandemic, Mathews said, an existing rift in higher education will only worsen. “We will see, as we unfortunately expect to see in times of financial crisis, a further widening of the gap between the haves and the have-nots, or the haves and the have-lesses,” he said.

That widening, Mathews wrote on Twitter, will be most profound for women and faculty members of color. “All the efforts and gains that have been made in ad-

vancing a faculty whose diversity reflects the student body will be at risk of being stalled,” he said, “if not reversed.”

### **‘I Don’t Know How to Think About My Future’**

Tom DePaola, who with Kezar and a fellow Pullias Center research assistant, Daniel T. Scott, wrote *The Gig Academy: Mapping Labor in the Neoliberal University*, said that it’s incumbent on faculty advocates and organizers to “convince leadership to not just suddenly start amputating limbs, but rather to come together and figure out a solution collectively.”

“No doubt there are administrators who see this as an opportunity to skip a few ranks,” DePaola said. “The university with a \$20-billion endowment is looking at the other universities that they might now surpass.”

To DePaola, the pandemic doesn’t pose new problems to academe as much as it magnifies existing ones. “Everything was held together with gum and paper clips, and coronavirus came and just sort of knocked

it all down at once,” DePaola said. “I think none of the crises that this virus is causing are new. They’re just accelerated greatly. And the contradictions of the system are heightened all at once for people to see.”

Some of those contradictions lie in the academic job market, which DePaola said “was already strained to its absolute breaking point” when the virus hit. That leaves him in a difficult place; DePaola plans to receive his Ph.D. in May 2021, but doesn’t know if he’ll venture onto the academic job market at that time.

“I think the market is just way too thin to bounce back in any way,” DePaola said. “I don’t know how to think about my future. I don’t know how anyone’s thinking about their own futures in the academy right now.”

*Megan Zahneis, a reporting fellow for The Chronicle, is a graduate of Miami University of Ohio.*

*Originally published April 9, 2020*



TIM COOK FOR THE CHRONICLE

# Tenure Is Not Worth Fighting For

At least not in its current form.

By **GREG AFINOGENOV**

**T**he collapse in secure, well-paid positions and their replacement with precarious teaching positions is a crisis that needs addressing. The answer is not more tenure, however. If we hope to succeed in making academic work viable, it can only be by joining a broader push for worker power and job security. Tenure does afford speech protections to a shrinking minority of academics, but why should such protections be exceptional? As long as some of us have something to defend that others

never had in the first place, it will be difficult to build the kind of solidarity that leads to lasting and substantive change.

Historically, the justification for tenure has rested on a subtle, even unacknowledged, conflation of the intellectual or civic roles of faculty members on the one hand, and their desire for secure employment on the other. The 1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure, which continues to define tenure in the United States, invoked the need to protect teachers

as “citizens, members of a learned profession, and officers of an educational institution,” but carefully defined the limits of the speech it protected by warning against the introduction of “controversial matter” into the classroom and reminding its beneficiaries that “the public may judge their profession and their institution by their utterances.”

The weakness of the tenure system for protecting heterodoxy became clear after World War II, when professors around the country lost their jobs in anticommunist purges (though untenured faculty members fared worse). While it is rare for tenured academics today to face career-ending consequences for political speech, administrations have found ways to make controversial faculty members’ lives miserable without dismissing them outright. For most others — whether because their views are uncontroversial or because they are in a position to clearly separate their public and professional identities — tenure is far more relevant for its guarantee of employment than for its speech protections.

Even at its height, tenure covered only about half of full-time faculty members and an even smaller proportion of faculty members as a whole. Within and beyond the academy, workers are routinely fired and harassed for political speech or for organizing. The unique status of certain academics has become harder to defend on intellectual or political grounds now than in the mid-20th century: The tenured professoriate is much richer, whiter, and more male-dominated than the rest of academe, let alone the population at large. Humanist academics today recognize in a way their 1940s predecessors did not that socially marginalized groups have often developed ideas and political platforms that only later came to be legitimized by credentialed intellectuals. There is less justification than ever for treating the latter as a community in need of special privileges.

Even in institutions where tenure has been weakened, its status institutionalizes a hierarchy of privilege and impunity whose chief victims are other academics — as in the case of John Brady, a Ph.D. student in engineering at the University of Wisconsin

at Madison driven to suicide in 2016, apparently in part by his abuse at the hands of the professor in whose lab he’d worked. Despite a profusion of reports confirming his behavior, the professor received only a brief suspension.

When we advocate for increasing tenure-track hiring, we do so in the hope of breaking down at least some of this hierarchy. But why should graduate students — who have been leading unionization drives and campaigning against abusive and harassing faculty members around the country — be left out of the charmed circle of academic freedom? What about other campus workers, such as janitors, administrative personnel, and food-service staff, who keep universities running and know more than most faculty members about what goes on behind the scenes? The idea that there is a neatly bounded group of people whose occupation entitles them and only them to speak to civic concerns is hard to sustain.

## **What about other campus workers, like janitors, administrative personnel, and food-service staff, who keep universities running?**

Critics of tenure have often made similar points, but mostly with the intention of making universities more “dynamic” and “entrepreneurial” — in other words, not bringing up other workers to the level of tenured faculty members, but eroding tenure so that everyone is equally powerless. It is no surprise that we are often reflexively suspicious of any challenge to the tenure system, so much so that we become blind to its most glaring failures. It’s important to be mindful of the ways our arguments can be misused, but we should not ignore the weaknesses of the system. They have harmed all of us in one way or another, whether as students, junior scholars, or advisers.

**O**ur defensiveness about the status of tenure finds little resonance outside the academy. The prestige of academe is at a nadir thanks to generations of right-wing demonization, to which the standard academic response has been to issue endless rebuttals heard only by our colleagues. Academics, even tenured ones, now lack the organized political and economic power to carry out the expansion of tenure-track hiring they demand. Reversing the cancer of academic neoliberalism and upending the increasingly rigid hierarchy of faculty positions would require the kind of financial and political investment that can only be produced by a broad-based social movement with a much more sweeping agenda. There are signs that a movement like this is building today, but it is hard for academics to take part in it as long as we demand privileges that other workers won't share.

Instead, we should fight to ensure that the employment conditions we consider our due — such as just-cause instead of at-will dismissal — become the norm for the economy as a whole. For instance, we should work to repeal right-to-work laws and ultimately the Taft-Hartley Act that enables them and makes labor solidarity more difficult in innumerable concrete ways. Closer to home, we should pressure administrations to recognize graduate and campus-worker unions. We should lend our resources and bully pulpits to citywide battles for labor and tenant rights — after all, colleges and universities are often among the largest employers and landowners in their towns. Many academics are already involved in this work, but as a whole, faculty members have been slow to recognize that these struggles are part of our own collective self-interest.

In countries like the United Kingdom, academics already benefit from just-cause protections extended to broader categories of employees. Yet, as many British academics are all too aware, such systems can protect job security while sacrificing the

autonomy afforded by academic freedom to rigid oversight by external bureaucracies. As we work to generalize the working conditions of tenured faculty members to the work force at large, we should ensure that we organize to gain or retain professional control over how we spend our time — without limiting that control to certain privileged categories of faculty members. Undermining the exclusivity of tenure should not be seen as in conflict with this goal, but rather as integral to it.

Decades ago, the professoriate could rely on its social prestige to protect the community of scholars from external intervention; today, as the status of faculty members moves closer to that of other service employees, like elementary- and secondary-school teachers, we need to follow their example and rebuild our power from below. Tenured-faculty work may, in the process, come to look very different — more like the job protections enjoyed by the vast majority of unionized public-school teachers than like the exclusive club of today's academe.

In a broad-based push for economic justice, both the need and the justification for academic hierarchy will fall away. Graduate and adjunct workers have already taken the initiative in campus organizing, but it is up to tenured and tenure-track faculty members to ensure that we are not the beneficiaries of zero-sum economic calculations that benefit us at the expense of our colleagues broadly defined. Buying off some workers and pitting them against others is a time-honored tactic in the hands of bosses; we should recognize it for what it is and resist it. In the long run, we stand together or we all fall separately.

*Greg Afinogenov is an assistant professor of history at Georgetown University. His book, Spies and Scholars: Chinese Secrets and Imperial Russia's Quest for World Power, appeared in April from Harvard University Press.*

*Originally published January 26, 2020*

# I Told My Mentor I Was a Dominatrix

She rescinded her letters of  
recommendation.

By **MISTRESS SNOW**



Something seemed off when I signed into Interfolio one late September morning, during the break between two classes I was teaching. I scanned the dossier a few times, wondering if it could be a glitch, and then it hit me: My mentor had withdrawn her letter of recommendation. In fact, she had withdrawn all of her letters, from 2016 to now. The revelation rang in my ears, like crystal shattering on the floor.

My mentor — let’s call her Anne — was the sole reason I finished my dissertation. While she wasn’t my adviser or even in my primary field, she was my cheerleader and confidante. We had become quite close. She said she felt *in loco parentis*; I called her my “dissertation mom.” But things fell apart when, desperate to quell her fears after a summer teaching gig fell through, I outed myself to her as a sex worker.

“You will lose all credibility,” she told me in a long, difficult email. As it turned out, in Anne’s eyes, I already had.

The power dynamics that structure mentorship in academia are nebulous at best. In my own department, the only formalized mentor-mentee relationship was the somewhat-arbitrary pairing of graduate students at varying stages of their degrees. Mentorship between students and faculty members was, by contrast, an entirely informal, ad hoc alliance. Boundaries within these relationships are similarly opaque. Mentors can resemble friends, collaborators, parents, and even, occasionally, lovers. But these relationships are never fully severed from the institutional power a mentor has over their mentee — an imbalance that mentors prefer to overlook, even if mentees never really can. Your mentee may be your friend. Your mentor is not.

This unspoken power differential is amplified by stark socioeconomic stratification. Tenure-line faculty will generally acknowledge that adjunct salaries and graduate stipends are comically insufficient, but their empathy stops short of understanding the material realities of living in poverty. Even though my “fully funded” Ph.D.-program stipend was approximately half of the local living wage, for instance, the faculty regu-

larly implied that those of us with part-time jobs weren’t “serious” about our academic work (another reason I kept the sex work I did as a struggling student — off and on from high school through graduate school — to myself). And when it comes to the plight of adjuncts, these same faculty members seem blissfully unaware that, in the “real world,” everyone is an adjunct — every hustle is a side hustle. If it’s so bad, they ask (without looking for a real answer), then why don’t you leave? Alas, there’s nowhere to go.

## **The academic sex worker illuminates the insidious class tension of academia. Look at me, whip in one hand, Foucault in the other.**

Most tenured faculty have dealt with low stipends at some point in their careers, but few have scraped by on them amid a post-recession economy, a student-debt crisis, and the austerity-fueled explosion of the adjunct sector. Assistant professors who have been there often discuss the “survivor’s guilt” that sours the rare joy of snagging a tenure-track position; they know that, for no good reason, so many qualified and deserving candidates will never get that chance. The job market was always “bad,” but it’s unfathomably worse now. If your mentor happens to reject — or refuses to sympathize with — that reality, though, then biting your tongue until it bleeds is probably your only option.

Between these two poles — the perennially guilty, early career researcher and the smug senior scholar with their head in the sand — lie the faculty who genuinely want their students to succeed, and believe that they can, but who feel powerless to halt the collapse of the professoriate. They don’t fault their students — but they don’t fault themselves, either. It’s the economy, the academy, in which we are all just pawns.

Do not remind these gentle souls that they are not, in fact, powerless.

**T**his past summer, a few months before embarking on my fourth round on the academic job market, and without any courses to teach for the semester, I found myself in a financial snafu. With no money in my checking account and no paycheck on the horizon, I had about a week to cobble together a couple grand before rent was due. The clock kept ticking; there was no lifeboat in sight. I was hungry. So I swallowed my pride, reluctantly dusted off my corset, and dialed up the old dungeon. By the end of the week, I was back in the sex trade, beating, humiliating, and degrading men (and sometimes women) for \$90 an hour, plus tips — slightly above my hourly adjunct pay before taxes. I made rent with \$60 to spare.

“Money is always nice to have,” Anne wrote to me, “but it doesn’t sound to me like this is about the money.”

For graduate students and contingent faculty, though, especially those of us who lack the family wealth to buffer poverty-level stipends, academia is always about the money.

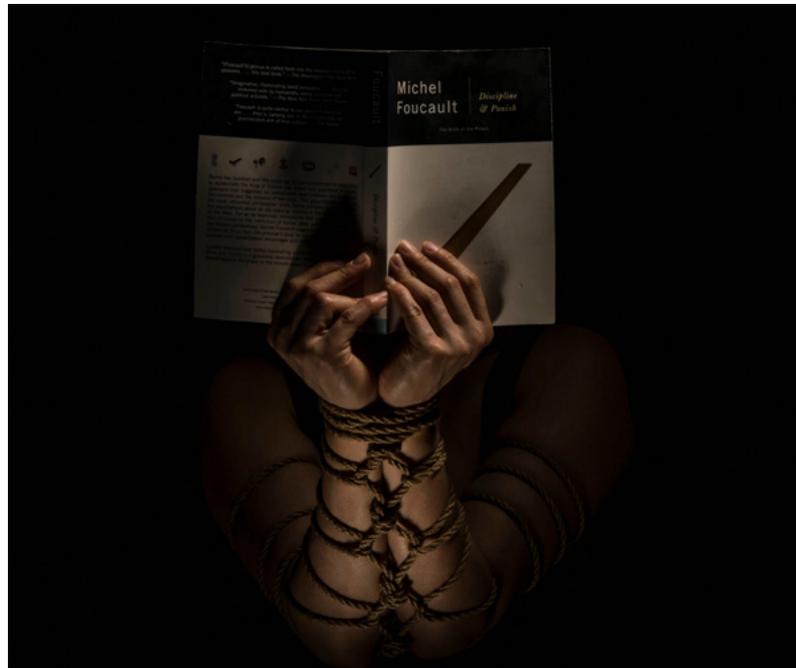
But Anne wasn’t talking about academia. She was talking about sex work. “If this information comes out in any way, shape, or form, it will destroy your academic prospects,” she wrote, frustrated. “Come on, is it worth it?”

The academy’s collective reluctance to talk about “worth” in concrete terms suggests to me that most tenured professors don’t understand how much money adjuncts actually make. Recently, Erin Bartram started collecting adjunct salaries. Her data indicate that most adjuncts’ earning power is similar to mine: I make around \$4,000 per class, before taxes.

“Increase your income or reduce your expenses,” Anne repeated, exasperated. I teach four classes per semester and occasionally a summer course; at best, I make \$28,000 annually, after taxes. There are few nonessential expenses I can afford to eliminate.

Generations of academics have sustained the professional myth of the “life of the mind,” failing to account for bodily experience within their conception of academic

labor. In the popular imagination, academia is an arena of purely intellectual pursuits, wherein the body is simply a vehicle through which the brain receives and produces knowledge. Thus, when a student finds that her bills outweigh her stipend and decides to bartend, or drive for Lyft, or copy-edit, it is her brain, not her already-vulnerable body, that her advisers lament.



MATT ROTH FOR THE CHRONICLE

Sex work, on the other hand, exposes the scholar’s body in a way that highlights the very vulnerability and, indeed, the humanity that academic work politely ignores. It lays bare the prevailing truth that bodily exertion cannot be acknowledged unless it is in service of intellectual work — never mind survival. The academic sex worker, selling her body to subsidize her brain, is a mirror: See how my candle burns at both ends. Look at how I set myself ablaze for you.

At the same time, the academic sex worker illuminates the insidious class tension that structures academia. Look at me, whip in one hand, Foucault in the other. Am I not decadent? And yet, I have the audacity to claim, with a face beneath my foot, that I suffer from poverty?

**A**s a curious foil to academic labor, which is both difficult and underfunded, sex work is often misconceived as easy and lucrative. It is neither. Sex work — an umbrella term for an industry that includes escorts, strippers, dominatrixes, sugar babies, adult-film performers, and phone-sex operators — is labor intensive. My own field of domination requires physical strength for corporal sessions, mental agility for role play, a keen awareness of time management to schedule and perform the components of a scene, and the stamina to take session after session over an eight-hour shift.

Like with adjuncting, my income from sex work seems reasonable on paper, but that's because it reflects only the hours spent in session, not the time that goes into training, planning, or promoting. While a particularly skilled and successful Domme may pull in six figures a year, sex work is more often a means of making ends meet. I, for instance, earn about \$500 a week — hardly enough to make a dent in my six-figure student-loan debt. Hypothetically, if I work seven days a week and retain steady clients, my annual income between domming and teaching may brush \$50,000.

There's another insidious misconception about sex work, which presumes that the sex worker is traumatized and striving to regain agency; that she is broken. Domination especially invites this stereotype: I, a survivor of rape and domestic violence, beat men as I have been beaten. But my relationship to domination is professional, not recreational, and assuming the position of my oppressor is in no way therapeutic. It is survival.

And yet the term “survival sex work” perpetuates stigma against sex workers by suggesting we are either hedonists, unable to divorce our sexual proclivities from our professional lives, or victims, reluctantly sacrificing our bodies as a last resort. The Madonna-whore complex for the 21st century. The reality, as always, is more complex.

While some of my dominatrix co-workers rely solely on sex work for their incomes, the majority of us are simply underpaid in our vanilla careers. My co-workers include: a school counselor, a union organizer, a ge-

neticist, a dental hygienist, an art teacher, and, of course, several students — all but one in graduate school. Most have college degrees. Many have master's degrees. Some are mothers. One thing we all share, though, is the burden of stigma from friends, family, and colleagues who believe that our work signifies a broken moral compass, rather than the reality that the conditions under which we must work are immoral.

## **The academic sex worker has a voice, and she needs her mentor to hear it.**

“Academia and sex work are mutually exclusive,” Anne insisted. (This is, needless to say, demonstrably untrue.) To her, my sex work wasn't the result of academia rejecting me; rather, it was evidence that I had rejected academia. I had chosen my body over my mind, and she could no longer support either. So, she wanted to teach me a lesson. “This,” Anne told me, “is mentorship.”

What the academic sex worker needs from her mentor, though, isn't confusion or derision. She needs to know that, despite the academy's devaluation of her labor, her work is valuable. Despite an income that excludes her from the middle class, she still belongs in the classroom. The academic sex worker has a voice, and she needs her mentor to hear it.

**T**he structure of mentorship is invariably more meaningful for the mentee than the mentor. For the mentee, especially first-generation-college students unfamiliar with the hierarchies and unspoken bylaws of academia, a mentor provides comfort, guidance, advice, and protection. When I confessed that I had been working as a dominatrix, what my mentor heard was that she had failed to support me — or, perhaps, that I was unworthy of her support.

She tells me I betrayed her.

My already-precarious academic career is on life support, sustained by a colleague's half-hearted, last-minute letter of recommendation to replace the one that Anne rescinded. I struggle to dominate, especially when I see academic clients — a local film professor, a retired Freudian, a biochemist — none of whom seem to be suffering any consequences for their participation in the sex trade. No, they collect their paychecks, leave their offices, and come to pay me, a junior colleague, for the pleasure of kissing my feet.

Sometimes, they brag: "I have a Ph.D., you know. From McGill."

"Is that so?" I ask. "Mine is from Michigan," or Penn, or Irvine, or wherever I like to pretend I earned my doctorate. They rarely believe me, and I stop trying to intimidate them with anything but my body.

I've started lying, like I wish I had to Anne. I cry more, I sleep less, I doubt my own ability to mentor my students. Am I, too, capable of such cruelty?

As a Domme, I am paid to be consensually cruel. Anne's cruelty is both gratis and gratuitous. Despite her disdain for BDSM, she is a natural at it.

And yet, I miss her. Her abandonment echoes through me, my hollow body, and I feel an absence in my heart as though she took the space she occupied in it with her.

My students will never suffer this loss.

*Mistress Snow is a pseudonym for a writer, critic, and adjunct professor. She recently received her Ph.D. in the humanities.*

*Originally published December 5, 2019*

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