



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Contingent Faculty, Just Labor, and the Need for a Think Tank

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Originally, this paper was presented at the Academic Labor and Contingent Faculty Committee and Academic Relations Committee panel of the American Academy of Religion, November 20, 2023, San Antonio. The theme of the panel was: Contingent Faculty, Just Labor, and the Ethics of Care.

I. Paradigm Shifts

*New occasions teach new duties,
Time makes ancient good uncouth,
They must upward still and onward,
Who would keep abreast of truth.*

James Russell Lowell wrote these words in the 1840s in a poem called “*The Present Crisis, criticizing the United States’ war with Mexico.*” In this extraordinary and timeless turn of phrase, Lowell reminds us that the world is always changing.

In dramatic alignment with Lowell’s sentiment, humanity is only twenty-three years into the twenty-first century. We are a society who has only recently moved from an analogue mindset to a digital universe. We are only barely acquainted with the rapid-paced technological age.

The implications and ramifications of the digital age and the changes in life and lifestyle have just begun to unfold. This might be especially true in higher education.

Grappling in this new time and landscape has caused a wide variety of industries to undergo minor and major shifts in labor paradigms – either by plan or by reaction. Higher Education, as a societal industry, is no different. Higher education is traversing this new landscape. The needed adaptations and changes have been a tremendous challenge that, at times, defeats us.

The decision to shift the labor paradigm of faculty in higher education feels like it was done on an ad hoc basis. Even so, the decision is pervasive. This decision to shrink the pool of tenured and tenure-track faculty and increase the number of adjunct faculty has changed higher education – is changing higher education – will continue to change higher education.

School administrators, often out of financial desperation, decided full-time contract faculty would be cheaper than tenured faculty. This strategy was undertaken without anticipating that, or planning for, the toxic environments which have been created. As a result of these decisions, many schools now operate with a permanent under-caste in the faculty.

II. Wabash Center

The mission of the Wabash Center is to support and strengthen teaching and the teaching life in theological and religious education. Our project has been in operation for 28 years and is solely funded by Lilly Endowment, Inc. Wabash Center, in serving entire faculties and individual scholars, has a unique vantage point for hearing the stories of faculty in religion and theology.

Each summer Wabash Center gathers more than fifty faculty from approximately fifty schools. These gatherings allow me, and other faculty leaders, to hear first-hand the stories and the concerns of teaching and the teaching life. The shift from tenure-track and tenured faculty to the hire of full time adjunct-ing faculty has created in a great many schools a two-tier faculty. The adjunct-ing faculty are treated as “less than,” while the tenured faculty are deemed as being superior. The workplace environments are described as being toxic by the contingent faculty.

III. Stories of Toxic Work Environments

We hear stories of exploitation, incivility, bullying, intimidation, ostracization, and subjugation. Many contingent colleagues tell stories of being invisible-d, silenced, and relegated to the bottom or margins of the institution. Many contracted faculty are seen as expendable while also being over-worked and demoralized.

Colleagues self-report feeling unwell, depressed, anxious, fatigued, and taken advantage of.

We hear stories of long work hours, impossible workloads, unhealthy life-work balance, demeaning bosses and colleagues, climates that are super competitive, and normalized behaviors of disrespect and disregard. Colleagues report experiences of sabotage and feelings of being targeted.

Many contracted colleagues have a sense of shame for not having a tenure-track or tenured job. Many have a sense of betrayal because, while they earned the requisite terminal degree, they are not treated with dignity, decency, or care as contract faculty. Many feel trapped in dead-end jobs.

The stories tell that schools have started a kind of academic segregation in faculties. Academic ghettos have been created. We know that the politics of segregation, when institutionalized, is cruel, brutal, and inhumane. There is no such thing as “nice” dehumanization.

While it might be typical to hear tenured faculty with similar criticisms, the clear difference is that tenure-track and tenured colleagues have health plans, retirement benefits, access to professional development opportunities, office supplies, and administrative support. Upward mobility is possible. There is, for some, an agreed upon career pathway in the institution. Most contingent faculty have few or none of these institutional benefits.

I suspect, like the toxic environments in corporate workplaces, administrative colleagues, for the most part, are unaware of the severe environment of their own schools. I suspect they are also unaware, or naïve, concerning the legal ramifications for work environments where harassment, bullying, and dehumanization is the norm.

An irony is that I suspect the shift in labor patterns has eroded teaching. Oppressed colleagues do not teach well or even adequately. The shift has resulted in a weakening of teaching and the teaching life. Education has been diminished.

The problem is not the colleagues who are employed as contingency faculty. The problem is the way institutions are treating people – by that I mean – institutions are treating people without dignity and without respect. All faculty, tenure or contract, are worthy of honor. A healthy workplace recognizes all employees as being valuable, worthwhile, useful, and meaningful to the organization and treats them as such. Too many schools are unhealthy and doing harm to faculty.

IV. Given the Current Mammoth Challenge

The shift in the labor force is not without cause. Schools are faced with low student enrollment and the forecast is that the available desirable pools of students will not return. This is compounded by the fact that most schools operate on a business model dependent upon tuition dollars and the related monies of having students on campus. These are critical dollars without which schools are doomed. Endowments require expertise in investment strategies in the roller coaster of the stock market. Some schools have been quite successful while other schools have

been hit hard. Shrinking dollars results in withering schools.

Initially, many schools made the reactionary decision to shift to contingency faculty to close a shortfall in the budget while thinking this decision would be temporary. This temporary measure has now expanded into a paradigm shift in the labor force of higher education and theological education. We are now living with the repercussions of a short-sighted fix for a very complex problem while we are in crisis.

In this time of crisis, how do we navigate the seemingly unsolvable?

V. Think Tank Needed

Most scholars of religion and theology, in their brilliance, are not able to do organizational problem solving on a large scale. While they are experts in their academic fields, experts in their chosen research area – able to critique, able to deconstruct and analyze – they are not trained in paradigm shifts. Given our current crisis, we do not have the luxury of deconstruction without re-construction. We cannot discuss our crisis as a rhetorical exercise. Lives and livelihoods are at stake.

We need minds who can problem solve, strategize, ideate, design, and develop sustainable systems to meet the current needs and available resources. Where are our think tanks?

A think tank is an organization that gathers a group of interdisciplinary scholars to perform research around particular policies, issues, ideas, or problems. Think tanks are charged with engaging problems from a multi-faceted approach considering social issues, public policy, economic trends, political strategy, culture, and technology. A think tank can be charged with advocacy, design, and education concerning the problems for which their research, dialogue and development is aimed. Some think tanks have laboratories for experimentation, internships, and apprenticeships.

Given the magnitude of our challenges - where is the think tank for theological and religious education? Who is convening scholars beyond religion and theology for their expertise on our crisis?

What needs to be turned over to the Think Tank?

1. What is dignity and respect in the workplace for shifting faculties?
2. What is the aim of education in the 21st century? What is the worth and value of formal study of religion and theology for?
3. What sustainable business models might educational institutions pivot toward?
4. What is the role and necessity of tenure? Why have tenure?
5. What are the effects of diversifying faculties? What does it mean to convene a diverse faculty that is healthy for all and not just some?
6. How can doctoral programs better prepare scholars to be administrators for nimble

organizations? Or – what is the formation process for school administrators who will be prepared for crisis and problem solving?

7. Other stuff, given the newness and complexity of our time, I have not thought about!

VI. Conclusion

The work of creating new paradigms, new business models, new models for teaching is confounding, but vitally necessary. I do not believe our future is collapsed nor foreclosed. I do not believe that our passions for education and teaching are pointless. We must convene our best minds. What is the way forward?

The truth is – we do not know, but together it is likely we can create what is needed.

<https://wabash.center/2023/12/contingent-faculty-just-labor-and-the-need-for-a-think-tank/>