

# FORUM

NEWSLETTER OF THE NON-TENURE-TRACK FACULTY SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP

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CONFERENCE ON COLLEGE COMPOSITION AND COMMUNICATION

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### From the Editor: More Good News

For this issue, I'd like to use the space available to report on activities of both the Non-Tenure-Track Faculty Special Interest Group (NTT SIG) and the Task Force on Improving the Working Conditions of Part-time and Adjunct Faculty.

### NTT SIG Update

The NTT SIG meeting at CCCC in Atlanta was the best-attended gathering since the group was revitalized in Milwaukee in 1996. Members of the Steering Committee first updated attendees about important initiatives and conference-related news. Scott Oury reported on his efforts to secure sponsorships from publishers to underwrite NTT faculty memberships in CCCC to complement CCCC's Project Access. Deborah Normand reported on the eleventh-hour cancellation of the Building Coalitions Special Event which fell prey to a major scheduling error and announced her plans to resubmit her proposal, insisting that the event be rescheduled for CCCC 2000 in Minneapolis and maintain its focus on NTT faculty issues. I (Bobbi) then updated everyone on the Executive Committee's decision to continue support for *Forum*, publishing it as inserts in CCC (Fall) and TETYC (Winter), and encouraged participants to contact Don Robbins at NCTE for complimentary offprints since several hundred of them remained at NCTE headquarters (see page A16 for details). Then we heard several brief but encouraging reports from SIG participants on realistic ways to protect and support non-tenure-track faculty on their campuses. The remainder of the hour was a time of open discussion and networking. Kim Flachmann, our chair, used that time to compile a mailing list of SIG participants which we hope to circulate sometime soon, and Mike Murphy invited participants to help him collect descriptions of different full-time composition teaching models for a study he is

## About *Forum*

*Forum* is published twice a year by the Non-Tenure-Track Faculty Special Interest Group (NTT SIG) of the Conference on College Composition and Communication. As editor, I welcome you to submit news items, book reviews, editorials and/or articles related to non-tenure-track faculty in college English or composition courses. Submissions for the fall issue should be received no later than April 15; for the winter issue, the deadline is August 15. Note: Submissions will not be returned.

You may submit your work electronically, via e-mail or an e-mail attachment, or through U.S. mail. For e-mail submissions, address your work to [rwerner@a-znet.com](mailto:rwerner@a-znet.com) and put the words "Forum article" somewhere in your subject line. If you choose U.S. mail, please send two hard copies as well as a diskette copy of your submission(s) to

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For both e-mail and U.S. mail submissions, include the following information in a cover note:

- your name
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For additional guidelines or information about *Forum*, contact Roberta Kirby-Werner at one of the addresses provided above or at (315) 443-1213.

The opinions expressed in *Forum* are those of the writers and do not necessarily reflect the views of the editor, the Non-Tenure-Track Faculty Special Interest Group, or CCCC.

conducting with colleagues at Syracuse University. Several past and current NCTE staff members attended all or part of the meeting as well, which was a first for our SIG.

Since the conference, the Steering Committee, also known as the Non-Tenure-Track Faculty Forum (but not to be confused with the newsletter *Forum*), has discussed expanding its ranks. I will update you on the status of this expansion in the spring 2000 issue.

## Task Force Update

Immediately following the NTT SIG meeting in Atlanta, Eileen Schell, in her capacity as co-chair of the Task Force on Improving the Working Conditions of Part-time/Adjunct Faculty, emceed a rousing rally focused on non-tenure-track faculty. The event drew a sizable crowd and featured Ira Shor, Karen Thompson, Leo Parascondola, and Steve Robinson as invited speakers. Eileen also reported on the work of the Task Force, noting in particular the Press Kit (in progress) published on the NCTE/CCCC website (<http://www.ncte.org/cccc/adjunct/>) and the desire to enlist more participants for the Task Force to take on more projects in the months ahead. As a member of the Task Force, I echo Eileen's invitation to CCCC members to join us. We can only be stronger by having more NTT faculty involved in the issues that affect our professionalism. We also welcome your feedback on the Press Kit and reports of how it has helped make good things happen where you work.

—Roberta J. Kirby-Werner  
Syracuse University  
September 1999

## **Creating Equity for Non-Tenure-Track Faculty: Whose Responsibility Is It Anyway?**

Teresa M. Purvis

My involvement as an advocate for non-tenure-track faculty working conditions began more than fifteen years ago when I began teaching part-time. I looked to my membership in professional organizations for answers and solutions to the problems I confronted: lack of benefits, inequitable pay, no job security, and inadequate and unprofessional physical amenities, to name a few. The noble efforts of the MLA and have often been met with dissatisfaction by some and praised as great strides by others.

Now I find myself in my tenth year as a full-time faculty member at a two-year college and as lead faculty member in a small department top-heavy in non-tenure-track faculty. I have not witnessed a decrease in the dependency upon non-tenure-track faculty at my school or at others with which I am familiar. I no longer feel that professional organizations are the source of a possible solution. The solution, if any is to be found, must originate with the institutions themselves and with the individuals who accept non-tenure-track appointments, whether full- or part-time.

My thoughts on non-tenure-track teaching and all the related issues have evolved significantly during these last fifteen years. When asked to give this presentation to the Midwest membership of the ADE, I was overwhelmed with the feelings of disappointment and futility I have personally felt in my roles as an advocate and teacher within a system that relies so heavily on the employment of non-tenure-track faculty.

Yet in considering this ongoing condition in our field, the word *responsibility* comes to mind. *Responsibility* seems to be a key word for all parties concerned with the issue of working conditions and employment for non-tenure-track faculty.

1. Professional associations have a responsibility to recommend guidelines for the fair and equitable treatment of non-tenure-track faculty and to recommend standards for their working conditions within the academy.
2. Two-year and four-year colleges and universities have a responsibility to those students they serve to provide a quality education offered by a highly qualified and competent faculty. These institutions also have a responsibility to make clear the terms and conditions of employment to all faculty.
3. Department and program administrators have a responsibility to create and maintain their academic curricula, and to nurture and support faculty.
4. Full-time tenure-track faculty—in addition to their teaching, research, and other professional duties—have a responsibility to their non-tenure-track colleagues. Non-tenure-track faculty *are* our colleagues and need to participate in the decision-making processes within our departments. For the benefit of our departments and

programs, the contributions of non-tenure-track faculty need to be recognized and welcomed.

5. Finally, non-tenure-track faculty themselves have the same teaching and professional responsibilities as their tenure-track counterparts, including academic preparation in the areas in which they teach and a commitment to the students they teach. Yet, because of the institution's lack of commitment to them, financial and otherwise, the most important responsibility non-tenure-track faculty have is to themselves. On accepting a part-time, temporary or non-tenure-track position, the individual is agreeing to the terms and conditions of employment established by the institution, without the promise of future full-time, tenure-track employment.

In light of the responsibilities outlined, it is necessary to direct some questions to the parties involved in the many aspects of this ongoing condition of non-tenure-track employment in the academy.

1. Is there any incentive on the part of colleges and universities for institutional change regarding non-tenure-track faculty and the terms and conditions under which they are employed?
2. What are the long-term effects on institutions and their academic programs resulting from decades of growing dependence upon a non-tenure-track faculty?
3. What can department chairs and tenure-track faculty do to promote change or improve working conditions of non-tenure-track faculty in their departments and programs?
4. If full-time employment is the goal of some part-time faculty, how can we as their graduate school professors and their colleagues help them to market their skills and/or make them more aware of employment possibilities outside of higher education?
5. How can we help those part-time faculty who have become disillusioned and embittered, waiting long years for full-time employment, to take responsibility for their lives and life choices?

The concern of those working to improve the conditions of non-tenure-track employment in higher education has always been how to create equitable working conditions and terms of employment, and to ensure the just treatment of employees. It has now become a question of what can those who are employed as non-tenure-track faculty do for themselves. If the institutions, departments, administrators, and tenure-track faculty have failed to recognize and fulfill their own responsibilities, then it appears that non-tenure-track faculty will need to be responsible for themselves. Non-tenure-track faculty will have to either enter into non-tenure-track contractual employment without illusions of equity and advancement, or refuse to enter into such employment and prepare themselves for professions outside of a traditional academic setting.

For many, this will open an uncharted world of possibilities, which will lead to a much more satisfying professional life than a tenuous and piecemeal existence on the edge of the academy could ever be.

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**Review of *Gypsy Academics and Mother-Teachers: Gender, Contingent Labor, and Writing Instruction* by Eileen Schell (Boynton/Cook, 1998)**

Mike Evces

As most readers of *Forum* know, the discussions, debates, and calls to action regarding academic labor in the field of composition studies have been making their way from the halls and offices of our buildings to the pages of our professional journals, books, and newsletters. The 1998 CCCC in Chicago featured several well-attended sessions which dealt with our working conditions, including an all-day workshop led by Professor Eileen Schell to address what might be done about the exploitation of part-time, adjunct, and non-tenure-track faculty as well as graduate students. Since then she has continued her leadership as co-chair of the CCCC Task Force on Working Conditions, which met at the CCCC in Atlanta to report on progress and to prioritize projects.

The publication of *Gypsy Academics and Mother-Teachers* marks another important contribution from Professor Schell to the increasing professional legitimacy of the labor crisis dialogue. Those of us who teach for minimal pay under adverse conditions with absurd workloads and a dearth of dignity will find our stories reflected in Schell's pages. Perhaps more important, though, everyone who "professes English" will find compelling arguments for including labor issues as an integral part of the professional discourse, rather than a marginalized gripe session (or as a liminal workshop at CCCC scheduled the day before most people get into town). While most of us know how to value the margins and appreciate liminality, Eileen Schell has done the hard work of pointing out why the academic labor crisis in composition studies needs to be brought closer to the center of our concerns.

Schell labels the lack of serious discussion of the labor crisis a case of "higher education illiteracy." Using "illiteracy" here is one way in which her book carefully

persuades the reader that in order to be true to the values we so readily espouse in our teaching, research, and other venues of professional discourse, we must pay serious attention to our own working conditions and to those of our colleagues. Calling for a new kind of “literacy” is perhaps a neat rhetorical turn which nicely resonates in the climate of multiple literacies and multicultural approaches. If we all want greater literacy, and can read and write of literacy’s many forms and social power, how can we say no to being literate about our own (professional/institutional) world? One does not have to be a disciple of Freire to grant this straightforward, logical call. To a profession which is dedicated to empowering students through literacy in all its forms, Schell dares to say, “physician, heal thyself.”

At the heart of the book, however, is a more specific and thorough analysis of composition as a field which exploits the labor of women. After establishing this fact, Schell critiques some of the most widely accepted forms of feminism in composition theory and pedagogy, endorsing a “feminist” rather than a “feminine” ethic of care. Thus she moves from an examination of material conditions into the realm of feminist discourse; having found shortcomings in “liberal” and “cultural” feminisms, she returns to the subject of material conditions in order to examine real, concrete attempts at making the profession more humane through collectivist tactics and “social feminist” principles. Schell refuses to merely deconstruct patriarchal classroom practices; she wants us all to follow our ethical sense into the world and challenge the patriarchal structures of our own profession. This link between professional reform and professed pedagogical values is one of the great strengths of *Gypsy Academics*.

As part of the program, Schell calls for more case studies of teachers’ working conditions. She provides an example of what this might look like in the opening section of the book, where she describes her life as a beginning composition teacher trying to hold down several jobs while earning a degree. She also offers qualitative data taken from small-scale surveys and interviews. But really, most readers won’t need data to accept the validity and reliability of Schell’s claims because most of us have lived the experience, or are living it now, ourselves. The most striking thing about the book, then, is how deftly Schell has crafted a clearly “scholarly” text—easily recognizable as good, intelligent, and original scholarship with all the markings of academic rhetoric—and at the same time put our selves in it, at a time when composition teachers have gotten used to being relegated not only to the margins of building and office space, conference schedules, pay scales, and teaching assignments, but also to the margins of “legitimate” scholarly discourse.

Labor crisis issues, of course, should not be raised without in some way answering the question of what to do about them. The quality of Schell’s arguments, and her syntheses of existing arguments, should lead to more publication on the topic of academic labor, and I expect that it will. But here again, *Gypsy Academics* goes a

step further. Schell includes a section on what options exist for real reform, not just for keeping the discussion going. In her summary, the options for change include (1) converting part-time positions to full-time tenure-track positions, (2) reforming the status quo by professionalizing the working conditions of writing instructors, (3) organizing unions and engaging in collective bargaining, and (4) abolishing/restructuring the first-year writing requirement. Each summary of potential action provides a good overview of what has been attempted in the past and what is being considered for the near future.

While this section, subtitled “Imperfect Solutions to Imperfect Problems,” does document the recent history and current status of attempts to address the academic labor crisis in writing instruction, Schell perhaps errs on the side of seeing everyone’s point of view a little too equally. The book concludes with a call for greater “higher education literacy” rather than a clear endorsement of one strategy over another. One might conclude from the sections on feminist composition pedagogy and its implications, especially the articulation of the “social feminist” position, that Schell would fall squarely in the camp of organizing at the grass-roots level. Considering the kinds of “emancipatory” political claims many people are willing to make about pedagogy, one would expect that this option would be the most appealing—if instructors don’t form unions, they would at least emphasize grass-roots organizing strategies rather than rely on the top-down, authoritarian strategies of the other options. But if Schell is to some degree perched on a political fence when it comes to “the next step,” it’s partly because options for reform vary so greatly among different institutions. Also, at this point in the history of composition studies, synthesis and overview are probably more needed than specific tactical strategies. Education is an important first step in organizing people, whether they be factory workers, nurses, or a class of first-year composition students. This book is a valuable tool for educating ourselves and each other, and furthering the cause of “higher education literacy” in our field.

*Gypsy Academics and Mother-Teachers* goes a long way toward synthesizing recent debates over composition pedagogy, feminism, and working conditions, and it demands a new standard of accountability from our profession. It is a watershed book of summary and sharp critique—as well as a message to writing instructors everywhere that although they may often seem to labor in isolation for scant compensation, they are not alone. In the labor movement, people call this feeling “solidarity” and recognize it as a source of real power and hope.

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## **Creating a More Perfect Union: Cultivating Academic Citizenship in the Face of Higher Education Restructuring**

Patrick Kavanagh

Perhaps the most obvious sign of efforts to corporatize the university in recent years has been the ongoing project of restructuring higher education to improve performance and reduce costs. That restructuring has had tremendous impact not just on the academic labor force but also on the concept and goals of undergraduate education. While some of these improvement initiatives are potentially quite positive, the obvious concern from the perspective of those who teach and learn in colleges and universities across the country is that the efforts to meet the growing expectations for accountability, productivity, and demand should not in any way compromise educational quality. The overuse and exploitation of part-time, non-tenure-track, and graduate student employees in the enterprise of undergraduate education that has become a key component/consequence of the restructuring efforts has threatened to do just that. The reality is that in fields like composition, where an institutional requirement determines the demand for labor, there is plenty of work. However, less and less of it pays a living wage, and the conditions of that work have rapidly deteriorated. Thus, as teachers and advocates for fair and equitable terms and conditions of employment, the goal for us is to understand the transformation of the academic labor force as part of the larger project of restructuring.

The key to meeting this challenge, while maintaining a commitment to quality education, I think, is seeing our common issues and concerns—as a part-time faculty member, full-time faculty member, non-tenure-track instructor, graduate student employee, union activist, or writing program administrator—in relation to those of other members of the community and as part of a struggle to resist restructuring and its consequences taking place within a larger institutional, professional, economic, and political context. As you might expect, I am convinced that the best way to achieve equity in the academic workplace is through collective bargaining, a point that is supported in the Statement from the Conference on the Growing Use of Part-Time/Adjunct faculty in 1997, as well as the numerous drives by part-time and graduate student employees to establish unions—most recently UCLA, where, after months of fighting for recognition in the UC system, teaching assistants recently voted 3 to 1 in favor of union representation.

I recognize that there are many obstacles to unionization for part-time, non-tenure-track and graduate student employees, so, while insisting that we must commit ourselves to that goal, I would like to underscore the basic starting point for any

reform efforts: we have to constantly be engaged in the work of educating, advocating, and organizing on our campuses, in our professional and disciplinary associations, our communities, and, most important, our state legislatures. If we commit ourselves to collectively developing strategies to resist the impact that the systematic restructuring of higher education is having on the conditions of teaching and learning, then we have an opportunity to improve them.

One point is central to this project: revitalizing an idea of academic citizenship that includes the diverse makeup of the academic labor force and that draws its strength from a shared commitment to workplace equity and quality education. The academic citizenship required is not simply a discipline-specific idea defined by a specific intellectual endeavor. Nor is it a citizenship that merely bestows formal rights upon individuals, yet still maintains an institutional structure that further marginalizes and disenfranchises. I'm imagining a notion of academic citizenship that creates unity based on collegiality and a shared commitment to improving the conditions of all who work in the university in the name of educational quality.

We know all too well that the emergence of the two-tiered system in the academy has created an entire population of second-class citizens in our workplace. Notably, however, this is the very group responsible for a majority of the undergraduate instruction in colleges and universities. It's not simply the overreliance on contingent labor that threatens academic citizenship in the academy today; rather it is the institutional devaluation of their work made explicitly clear by the terms and conditions of their employment: poverty-level wages, limited or no health insurance coverage, the absence of opportunities for professional development and research, the lack of job security and the insufficient notification of appointment, substandard office space (if any) and limited access to clerical staff.

The attitudes and positions regarding the nature of part-time work that are promoted by disciplinary associations can either enable or frustrate attempts to develop a notion of citizenship necessary to combat the impact of restructuring, downsizing, and casualization. As a "teaching subject," one that, according to Joseph Harris, "defines itself through an interest in the work students and teachers do together" (ix), composition is well positioned to take the lead in a discussion of the conditions that contribute to the educational enterprise. Similarly, in "After Wyoming," Jennifer Trainor and Amanda Godley argue that it is necessary to understand the ways in which "exploited and alienated professional identities" undermine the acts of teaching and, along with them, the "goals of our profession" (180). Such an understanding is essential to successfully reform the academic labor practices that contribute both to these identities and their professional consequences.

The efforts of part-time, non-tenure-track, and graduate student employees have prompted disciplinary associations to become more responsive to academic labor

concerns in recent years. These groups have undertaken various projects to increase their visibility and promote labor issues in ways that facilitate academic citizenship. The CCCC Non-Tenure-Track Special Interest Group has organized panels and workshops at the annual convention, and they have sponsored rallies to bring contingent laborers together to share strategies and experiences. Of course, *Forum* has played a major role in presenting academic labor issues to the organization as a whole.

Similarly, in response to the continued erosion of full-time, tenure-track jobs in literature and the modern languages, and to the exponential growth in part-time appointments (many of which have been in composition and not literature), the Graduate Student Caucus (GSC) has organized effectively around issues relating to employment and the future of the profession. Equally important has been their sustained critique of the MLA's inability to adequately respond to these realities.

For example, as past president of the MLA, Elaine Showalter devoted her term to promoting careers outside the university as a way of addressing the job crisis in the humanities. These alternative careers, according to Showalter, include "stimulating, well-paid careers in business, government, the media, and technology" (3). Notably absent, though, are the plethora of jobs that do exist in the university and the working conditions that characterize them—they are absent, one can assume, because they are hardly "well-paid" and their status as "stimulating" is debatable.

The GSC campaigned against Showalter's solution and used the December 1998 convention to take control of the debate within the MLA. At the convention, the GSC presented ten resolutions to the Delegate Assembly; seven passed, and one was withdrawn. In addition, two of the GSC's four candidates for election to major committees were elected. As a result, graduate students in the MLA will now have seats on powerful governance committees, and, perhaps most important, the MLA will collect and publish data on the salaries and working conditions of part-time faculty and teaching/graduate assistants in departments of language and literature. The ability of the GSC to unite the concerns of graduate students and full-time and part-time faculty has allowed them to develop a critique of academic labor practices and of the MLA's own inability to respond to the crisis in a substantive manner. In doing so, it has forced the organization to take serious action.

Unfortunately, as Edward Said's inaugural President's Column suggests, the MLA leadership continues to struggle with how to address issues of academic labor and the future of the profession. After acknowledging the impact of corporatization and the increase in "exploitative, poorly paid, menial 'service' jobs"—read: composition—for new PhDs in the humanities, Said laments the disappearance of literature in the graduate and undergraduate curriculum. For Said, the answer to the institutional and public "downgrading of the humanities" that the current job crisis has made so evident is "a reinforced sense of intellectual responsibility—responsibility

to what in fact we ought to do, namely, the interpretation, analysis, and serious consideration of literature in its historical and social environment" (3). His effort to reassert the centrality of literary study in English widens the distance between literature and composition, thereby reinforcing the marginal status of composition and those who work in that field. The goal, for Said, is to establish the significant place of the humanist in society, someone who is not teaching composition.

Such a vision depends on a gross misunderstanding of the current realities of academic opportunity and work in the humanities and does absolutely nothing to bridge the gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots" in the academy. In fact, it makes this gap worse. To do the work that Said is imagining would require an established position of privilege within the discipline, one that even a perfunctory glance at recent data would belie. The work of restoring the intellectual coherence of the humanities is work that few would actually be in a position to undertake.

Most distressing about Said's column is that, despite calling for a renewed sense of citizenship in the humanities, one that is elitist and discipline specific, Said fails to clarify how such a renewed commitment to the principles of literary study would attend to the "increasing use, and economic abuse, of part-time, adjunct, yearly contract, and graduate student employees" (3)—the second-class citizens he acknowledged in his first sentence. To effectively develop the sense of citizenship necessary to resist such abuses, we must represent and promote the issues to the various constituencies for whom they matter most in such a way that we are in positions to advocate and reform.

If the kinds of ineffectual responses provided by Showalter and Said are some of the major impediments to developing coalitions for academic citizenship, and if the Non-Tenure-Track Special Interest Group and Graduate Student Caucus initiatives are becoming increasingly necessary and important, then the following alternatives might facilitate such an endeavor. More than anything else, this work demands visibility and effective articulation of the concerns and interests of all parties. It is important then that full-time, part-time, and graduate student employees work together to promote our common interests in improving the working conditions of all academic laborers. This has to take place on our own campuses, as well as in conjunction with other institutions in a state or region.

Here are a few examples: college and university faculty unions and other organizations must make a commitment to increasing visibility throughout their states and communities on important higher education issues. If the initiatives to restructure are developing outside of our campuses, then we have to extend our principles of activism and advocacy to that space. This will require a significant amount of coordination and coalition building. At Rutgers, for example, the AAUP has representatives at all meetings of the state Commission on Higher Education to speak on behalf of faculty and students regarding educational issues. Likewise, we testify in favor of or

against legislation that would impact the state's colleges and universities. In a related effort, we hosted a higher education forum in Trenton with other higher education unions in the state to raise awareness among legislators. A series of position papers were presented on a range of issues, including the need to adequately fund higher education, issues of access and affordability, and the relationship between the transformation of the academic labor force and undergraduate education.

In response to the overuse and abuse of part-time faculty and in an effort to address the difficulties of bringing part-time faculty together due to their isolation and political weakness on most campuses, National AAUP has undertaken two important projects. The first is an organizing kit for part-time and non-tenure-track faculty titled *Working for Academic Renewal: A Kit For Organizing on the Issues of Part-Time and Non-Tenure-Track Faculty*. The second is a new grassroots response to part-time issues in the Greater Boston area. The Boston Organizing Project is a metropolitan-area, multicampus organization bringing together activists from among the part-time and full-time faculty and graduate students. The organization plans to link together demands for better pay, benefits, and working conditions for part-time faculty with the defense of quality education and the profession.

Central to this project is an educational campaign that focuses on the state of higher education, as well as the impact that part-time work is having on the quality of jobs in the academy. The AAUP is currently conducting a survey on the pay and conditions for part-time faculty in the Boston area. Anyone, however, can participate in the survey at [www.aaup.org](http://www.aaup.org). The survey will serve to identify key organizing issues and to initiate a public debate on the future of higher education. Most promising here is the possibility of a diverse advocacy organization that, working with other campus groups, might mobilize public opinion and become a real force to bring justice to the academic workplace. Moreover, it uses a concept of academic citizenship based on collective interest to transform the migratory and transient status of part-time faculty that has been such a roadblock for making these issues visible. The Boston Project has had two large and successful meetings so far and is currently preparing for a fall educational campaign.

One thing is certain: we can't be content with just a critique of the restructuring of higher education and the transformation of academic labor, nor can we simply despair. Those of us who work in the academy have to couple our vigorous critique with an understanding of our position in that larger structure—be it as an elite humanist or a migrating part-timer—in order to develop new modes of action to respond to the restructuring that threatens the enterprise of teaching and learning.

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*Patrick Kavanagh is a graduate student at Rutgers University and a staff member of the Rutgers AAUP. This is a shortened version of a paper presented at the CCC in Atlanta on March 26, 1999.*

### **Restoring the Spirit in Academe**

Thomas J. Ernster

As academic professionals, we bear an enormous responsibility. Our first priorities are to support each other and to educate college students. I feel some deep anxiety, however, that our relatedness as colleagues and our effectiveness as teachers are jeopardized by the politics out of which has emerged the "job crisis" in academe today. Are we denying students the quality education we are morally obligated to provide them and which they deserve? Are we committed to restoring the spirit of community within higher education that seems to have been exchanged for what John Lovas refers to as "a marketplace condition in which highly qualified professionals can readily be hired in highly unprofessional conditions" (A9)?

I share Roberta J. Kirby-Werner's general feeling of awkwardness (A10) when expressing my concerns for and support of non-tenure-track faculty. I am grateful to hold a full-time position as an English instructor at a college that is never likely to offer me a tenure-track opportunity. But I work very hard and conscientiously, and I feel appreciated by my students, my colleagues, and my administrators.

Yet, I need to express my concern about the monstrous tension, not soon to disappear, causing pandemonium in higher education today. It has produced a syndrome within academe which undermines the professionalism and expertise of full- and part-time non-tenured faculty and separates all members of the profession. There was nothing more disillusioning than to read about the part-time faculty groups protesting in early 1998 at the Capitol in Washington and at the headquarters of the City University of New York for academic support and rights. The politics causing those protests and the disharmony crippling our intellectually rich and talented community is an anathema, I think, to academic camaraderie and quality education in college classrooms across the country. This is of serious concern for all of us.

I am moved, therefore, to reflect on the broader implications of this tension, which is in part represented by the shared and expressed attitudes toward non-tenured faculty by those seated in their tenured towers and also by those faced with making crucial decisions upon completing their doctoral programs.

Some of our most outspoken adversaries are those nearing completion of their graduate studies at research institutions. Their “best-laid schemes” for securing those greatly coveted and also well-deserved tenure-track positions are threatened by members of our close-knit cadre whom a few of them refer to as “non-degreed laborers.” We are “persons without significant experience, with little or no training, no certification, and in most cases a teaching future of fewer than four years” (Wilson A15). My spirits weaken momentarily after reading words like these, and I cannot help but recall a poignant image from Homer’s *Iliad* where he describes how “a garden poppy, burst into red bloom, bends, / drooping its head to one side, weighed down / by its full seeds and a sudden shower” (VIII: 349–352). Let us not forget that garden poppies are as rich and splendid as the other varieties of flora with which they bloom in marvelous concert.

Ironically, many PhD candidates, as a result of the “politics” and their possible resistance to considering other options for employment, may be forced to accept non-tenured faculty positions at four-year colleges and universities. Or, Fortune feeling inclined to tilt her wheel in their favor, they may earn themselves tenurable positions at two-year colleges, but for which their training has not prepared them. While some will rise to the occasion and adapt to the drastic shift in academic culture, others, needing to eat while looking for a “real” teaching/research position, may accept two-year college appointments that will eliminate job opportunities for the highly experienced, dedicated, and gifted MAs, who find academic richness in the community college environment where teaching, advising, and mentoring non-traditional, career-oriented students provide them both professional and academic fulfillment.

I am certain that the majority of my academic peers—those who fall under the broad definition of non-tenure track faculty—are as experienced and as fully prepared as I feel I am to be teaching. And that we continue to be movers and shakers with regards to the part-time/adjunct “problem” in higher education does not diminish our effectiveness as positive and productive teachers and scholars.

While none of us can ignore the critical issues which help to define the academic “job crisis”—fiscal constraints, quality instruction, working conditions, and labor equity—we also cannot allow our spirits to be broken by the existing politics. Like all of us, I cope with the many obstacles but never allow my frustrations to reflect in my teaching. I remain excited about what I do, I care about my students, and I am willing to sacrifice tenure in order to preserve what I have and hold most dear.

I am enlightened by Katherine Kolb's words of wisdom in her exemplary essay, "Adjuncts in Academe: No Place Called Home": "We are certifiably teachers, professors, instructors, scholars...and we bear a remarkable resemblance to our regular counterparts" (95). We do. And, as pointed out in the *Final Report of the MLA Committee on Professional Employment*, "we all must form alliances [within the profession]...so that we can all speak forcefully and publicly about the intellectual, political, and economic threats faced by a society that tolerates a decaying educational infrastructure" (28). Instead of the non-tenured faculty protesting exploitation, as they did in Washington during the winter of 1998, it should have been *all faculties* protesting the politics which have created it.

Ms. Kolb concludes that "a good attitude can only make the best of a bad situation" (102), which coincides with MLA's urging all of us to work together, in the spirit of collegiality. While I am chagrined by the remarks of our "regular counterparts" toward our level of commitment and expertise, I understand their frustrations, too. Their dreams for academic fulfillment are threatened—but certainly not by our ranks in the profession. Like us, they have become victims of the lurking, academic Grendel that produces enormous unrest and uncertainty within our community.

Unfortunately, there is no Beowulf to rid our community of this monster. As it continues to widen the gap between tenured and non-tenured, between scholar and teacher, it also threatens to remove the sacredness of the classroom, wherein students reach out to embrace the knowledge and guidance that will elevate them to higher spiritual and moral awareness. Only as co-participants within the community of lettered faculty can we subvert this academic demon: And to do so is our moral obligation, not only for the sake of higher education, but also for moral and academic integrity.

Parker Palmer shares with his readers that "truth involves entering a relationship with someone or something genuinely other than us, but with whom we are intimately bound. Truth contains the image we are seeking—the image of community in which we were first created, the image of relatedness..." (31). We are all intimately bound and empowered to transcend the politics in higher education—spiritually, socially, and intellectually. And, as a community, we must not allow troubling politics and the unsettling job market to undermine the social and moral responsibilities we have to each other and to those we teach.

Continuing to honor and be inspired by the knowledge and expertise of my tenured colleagues, and supporting and acknowledging the experience and commitment of my non-tenured peers is, I believe, part of my professional responsibility. It keeps me deeply connected to this spirit of community of which Parker Palmer speaks and which I envision as being restored within academe.

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