

Flushing Out the Basements: The Status of Contingent Composition Faculty in Post-Katrina New Orleans—and What We Can Learn from It

Nicole Pepinster Greene, Xavier University of Louisiana

In recent decades, higher education has increasingly relied on contingent faculty to teach multiple sections of composition courses with low pay and few benefits. Administrators have argued that institutions need these faculty to protect tenure-track faculty in times of financial difficulty and to manage fluctuating enrollments. When Hurricane Katrina forced universities and community colleges to declare financial exigency or force majeure, contingent faculty were the first to be terminated. However, their dismissal did not protect tenured and tenure-track faculty. Moreover, without contingent faculty, the Xavier University English Department successfully managed to staff composition classes in the first semesters following Katrina, a period of uncertainty and fluctuating enrollments. This success shows that the employment of large numbers of part-time faculty cannot be rationalized. Furthermore, faculty should strive to integrate part-time colleagues into the academy, and administrators should follow the example of departments which have successfully converted part time positions into tenure-track appointments.

As anyone who is familiar with New Orleans knows, the city has no basements since most of it lies below sea level. But the title of this paper refers to Susan Miller's chapter on the status of

part-time, adjunct faculty entitled “The Sad Women in the Basement” in her 1991 book, *Textual Carnivals: The Politics of Composition*. Although I must emphasize that I have met very few “sad” adjunct teachers of composition, that such a large group of faculty exists at all, particularly in the “Humanities,” is lamentable; indeed, over half of all faculty teach off the tenure-track (Schell and Stock 5). Miller is correct, therefore, in positioning this group of composition faculty in the basement of the hierarchical structure of academia, since they are often hired to ensure the security of tenured faculty. She is also accurate in gendering this group as predominantly female.

Before I continue, I also want to clarify my use of the term “contingent” faculty. I use this word as does Eileen Schell in *Gypsy Academics and Mother-Teachers: Gender, Contingent Labor, and Writing Instruction* since “contingent” accurately describes the working conditions of non-tenure-track faculty. These faculty are hired semester by semester, or perhaps for a period of one to six years, and teach more courses and more students than tenured faculty. Their pay is often *not* pro-rated on full-time faculty pay; they receive few if any benefits; they are assigned courses two or three days before the start of the semester, and they are frequently denied the luxury of choosing their own texts or writing their own syllabi. Some institutions operate under a bifurcated system of tenure-track and temporary faculty, while others use a trifurcated system of tenure-track faculty, temporary faculty, and then permanent or “retained” instructors whose positions, we have been assured, are as secure as tenured faculty.

While most English faculty deplore the exploitation of their colleagues, we often accept the argument promoted by upper-level administrators that we need contingent faculty to deal with the uncertainty of first-year enrollments and to provide a cushion of security for tenure-track faculty when enrollments drop or when institutions face financial uncertainty. Consequently, I wanted to investigate just how contingent faculty fared in post-Katrina New Orleans. As you will see, the fate of these

colleagues has not been surprising, but whether the reason for their existence—to shore up the security of tenured faculty and address the problem of fluctuating enrollments—has really been proven, remains doubtful.

To see what happened, I looked at the status of contingent, non-tenure track faculty before and after Katrina in one community college, two private universities, and one large state university.¹ When the fall 2005 semester began at Delgado Community College, thirty contingent faculty were hired to teach English and developmental composition. (Eight of these were brand-new hires; only one of this group returned.) Immediately after Katrina in fall of 2005, Delgado held a special, tuition-free “online classes only” semester and hired no adjuncts. In the spring and summer semesters of 2006, Delgado rehired one faculty member. Then in fall 2006, the college hired eight contingent faculty; five were part of the original thirty from fall 2005, but one was a completely new hire, and two taught several years ago at Delgado. Altogether this has resulted in a loss of twenty-two contingent faculty.

At the University of New Orleans, the situation was a little different. I was not able to get exact numbers; however, I was told that all contingent faculty were laid off after Katrina and then about eleven were rehired in spring 2006. Pre-Katrina contingent faculty taught approximately 45 sections out of 350—about 13%; in the fall post-Katrina semester, they taught 23 sections out of 230, 10%—so here too, there has been a considerable drop in the numbers of contingent faculty.

At Loyola University, Kate Adams reported yet another variation. Two fulltime (temporary) instructors decided to leave New Orleans and the university. Two part-timers were let go. One tenured faculty member teaching composition also left in 2005 and another left in 2006. By fall 2006, three fulltime temporary composition instructors had been hired, and one part-time instructor was reinstated. They planned to hire fulltime tenure-track faculty at MLA in December 2006.

In August 2005, at Xavier University, we enjoyed our largest first-year enrollment on record. We had one full-time continuing instructor, four contingent faculty on one-year contracts teaching full-time, and one part-time faculty member. All of these were let go after Katrina and none have been rehired. In fall 2005, we also had two new tenure-track hires. However, one of these positions was terminated after Katrina, but our colleague was rehired in May 2006, for one semester, and in fall 2006 was fully reinstated as tenure-track faculty. I want to highlight the fact that both these tenure track faculty had already been employed at Xavier as contingent faculty. In the English Department we have been particularly successful in transferring contingent faculty to tenure-track positions, a situation that should be happening everywhere.

But numbers certainly do not tell the whole story, and so we should take a quick look at the lives of our colleagues following their dismissal. First, of the six non-tenure faculty let go, four were women. This exactly matches Miller's statistics that "two-thirds of people who teach writing are women" (124-25). Gender statistics at Delgado are similar. Nancy Richard reported that, in fall 2005, two-thirds of their contingent faculty were women; a year later that number stood at fifty percent. Not surprisingly, contingent faculty tend not to be homeowners. Only one of Xavier's six contingent faculty owned her home; thus these faculty not only lost their jobs but they also received little or no compensation from insurance companies. As Schell has pointed out, "It is they who suffer the most in the wake of budget crises, an unstable job market, and the erosion of working conditions," (*Gypsy* 13) and we should add, Hurricane Katrina.

Now more specifically, I want to relate the story of one of my colleagues: to ensure some anonymity, I'll call her "Jane." Jane came to our department in 2004 as a very experienced teacher of composition. She had taught for several years at Delgado Community College, and friends there often told me how lucky we were to have her. Apart from being an outstanding teacher, she was also an invaluable

colleague on the composition committee. Hurricane Katrina destroyed Jane's Lakeview apartment and all its contents. She evacuated to live with family in Houston, where she immediately found work at Houston Community College and the downtown campus of the University of Houston. A few weeks later, in September, she became a Hurricane Rita evacuee. At the end of October, she received notification that she had been laid off from Xavier University; in fact, like other university employees, she discovered that she had been officially terminated at the end of September. Jane found an apartment in Houston and continued working the rest of the year, trying to make ends meet as a part-time temporary instructor at several institutions.

Eileen Schell has calculated that an instructor who is paid \$1800.00 a course and teaches a full-time load earns \$12.00 an hour when grading, preparation, and office hours are included ("What's" 332). This figure does not include the travel time that Jane would have spent commuting in Houston between one institution and another. In comparison to an adjunct's pay, the hourly rate for a union carpenter in Louisiana is \$15-\$20 an hour; \$35.00 an hour in Illinois. While working all year, Jane also began applying for a full-time position in an upper New York state community college. Apart from her credentials and references, her new employers were impressed that she had been willing to finance her own travel across the country for the interview. After investing a lot of money in postage and travel, she secured a full-time job. Jane is now settled in New York State and has also been admitted to the very prestigious low residency MFA program.

Since it is obvious that the contingent faculty were severely affected with job losses as a result of Katrina and Rita, did they serve their purpose? First of all, did they cushion the blow to tenure faculty? The answer is No! All four institutions furloughed tenure-track and tenured faculty. At Xavier University, contracts for all tenured and track-track faculty were initially voided, and then most but not all were rehired by November 2006, and tenure was subsequently reinstated. Salaries

for these faculty continued to be paid. Three of the universities had declared *force majeure* or financial exigency—Loyola did not since it suffered minimal storm damage—and under that declaration of *force majeure* or financial exigency “the university is not strictly bound to honor faculty tenure or seniority as far as layoffs or reinstatements (Mackin 50).

Thus throughout New Orleans, faculty are still questioning the meaning of tenure since, in some cases, tenured faculty were let go while more junior faculty were retained. As a friend and former colleague noted when I met him at a June 1 party marking the start of a new Hurricane season: “The president took the opportunity to get rid of dead wood, old wood, and trouble-makers, and I fit all three categories.” I am not in a position to judge the accuracy of his comment, but I do know that it was a little too self-deprecating. Like other furloughed faculty, my colleague discovered that while Katrina had disrupted all aspects of his life, she also provided him with fresh opportunities. He was hired by another Louisiana university where he is now establishing a new PhD program in his field.

In adopting this corporate model of running a university dependent on a “flexible,” i.e. “disposable” workforce, upper-level administrators, as they so often do, once again miscalculated the dedication and collegiality of their faculty. When we returned to Xavier after Katrina and realized that some of our co-workers had been terminated, a colleague of senior rank himself suggested that it would have been preferable for senior professors to have taken a pay cut rather than suffer the loss of their colleagues.

Taking as my model the Special Interest Group for Non-Tenure Track faculty of the Conference for College Composition and Communication (CCCC) in which I participated for several years during the 1990s, I want to emphasize that this paper should not be read as an opportunity for “whining.” In raising these problems, I aim to see what we have

learned from this experience and how we can move forward within our academic communities to improve the conditions of contingent faculty. There are many resources available for adjunct faculty and administrators who are concerned with these issues. For example, CCCC's publication, *College Composition and Communication*, includes a newsletter, *Forum*, specifically for contingent faculty. A recent *Forum* bibliographic article published a list of websites devoted to contingent faculty, including the Modern Language Association website (McDonald and Fox). In addition, I can describe a few ways in which the English Department at Xavier has proceeded. First, and most importantly, our current and former chairs have been successful in hiring contingent faculty as tenure-track faculty when a position in their specialty becomes available. This must always be our first goal. Second, faculty on one-year appointments at Xavier are not paid by the course but receive a full-time salary and health benefits, and they are compensated for their former teaching experience. Thirdly, contingent faculty are always treated as full-time, tenure-track colleagues; they are welcomed to participate in the professional and social life of the English department. They attend departmental meetings and social gatherings, serve on committees if they wish, and play a major role in the decisions made by the composition committee. Their integration is perhaps facilitated by the fact that all of us regularly teach composition classes, a situation which narrows the divide between tenure-track faculty and contingent faculty. Having been without contingent faculty during the whole of 2006, with the exception of one faculty member for one semester, you might want to know how we have survived, and how composition courses have been staffed.

We have done very well. Of course, we have missed our friends—the department is a much quieter place with a little less laughter. Yes, since Katrina, all tenure-track faculty have been teaching composition every semester, sometimes even two sections instead of perhaps one or two composition courses a year as we did before Katrina. This commitment to first-year teaching at all levels, from developmental to honors,

is in keeping with the mission of Xavier University. Furthermore, this common teaching responsibility has further strengthened our collegiality. For example, the week of the 2006 SCMLA conference, at the request of our chair, we devoted our departmental meeting to sharing ideas on best teaching practices in first-year composition.

Even though we hired no contingent faculty in fall 2006, and despite the fact that our chair had to schedule multiple sections without the flexibility of calling on part-time faculty, our class sizes in composition remained steady at pre-Katrina levels, proving that an English Department can function very well, perhaps better, without contingent faculty teaching composition. In view of this success, I hope that we will be able to show the administration that the need for part-time contingent faculty has become redundant. Perhaps then, we can at last brick up and fill in those uninhabitable basements once and for all.

Notes

1. My research was facilitated by the help of Kate Adams, Professor of English and Director of Freshman Writing at Loyola University, Nancy Richard, Professor of English and mentor to adjunct faculty at Delgado Community College, and Peter Schock, Professor of English and Department Chair at the University of New Orleans, and, of course, my colleagues, present and past, at Xavier University of Louisiana.

Works Cited

- McDonald, James and Dorinda Fox, "A Guide to Contingent Faculty Websites," *Forum: Newsletter of the Committee on Contingent, Adjunct, and Part-time Faculty, (CAP)* 6.2 (spring 2003): A1-A4.
- Mackin, Jana, "Back to School? Local Universities Post-Katrina," *Where Y'At*, Sept 2006: 48-51.
- Miller, Susan. *Textual Carnivals: The Politics of Composition* Carbondale, IL: S Illinois UP, 1991.

Schell, Eileen E. *Gypsy Academics and Mother-Teachers: Gender, Contingent Labor, and Writing Instruction*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1998.

_____, "What's the Bottom Line?" Eds. Eileen E. Schell and Patricia Lambert Stock. *Moving a Mountain: Transforming the Role of Contingent Faculty in Composition Studies and Higher Education*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 2001.

_____, and Patricia Lambert Stock, "Introduction: Working Contingent Faculty in[to] Higher Education." Eds. Eileen E. Schell and Patricia Lambert Stock. *Moving a Mountain: Transforming the Role of Contingent Faculty in Composition Studies and Higher Education*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 2001.