

# **An Overview of the Contingent Faculty Environment**

Steve Wilson Ph.D.  
Sonoma State University  
steve.wilson@sonoma.edu

In the struggle to improve the working conditions of contingent faculty, it is important to understand our environment in order to determine the courses of action to take. Ours is a struggle of civil rights proportions, and these struggles require a great deal of consciousness raising. We need to identify the people who are responsible and seek to understand why.

## **1. Tenure Track Faculty**

The first group that comes to mind is the tenure track faculty. While tenure track positions are created by administrations, it is the tenured faculty who generally decide who gets those positions. Since they also decide whether we participate in faculty governance is very important to have this group on our side, and if they are not, we need to understand why and seek to do something about it.

One hypothesis is some sort of classist elitism. However, it is important to realize that most faculty, even, and perhaps especially, tenured faculty like to see themselves as champions of the downtrodden and oppressed. When we can appeal to that side of them, we make progress. We all have horror stories about tenure track faculty. However, if you examine them, I think you will find that they usually involve decisions made by chairs and hiring committees, who are under extreme economic pressure from their administrations. Remember, the most immediate cause of the proliferation of lecturers is the failure of administrators to hire enough tenure track faculty to meet the need, forcing many faculty, who should have regular jobs, to accept second class status as lecturers.

All faculty should also beware of administrations' attempts to divide and conquer by pitting lecturers and tenure track faculty against each other. Faculty who have spent much time in the halls of power can tell stories of administrators taking advantage of opportunities to make disparaging comments about the quality of their contingent colleagues. If we really are inferior, why are administrations letting more and more lecturers be hired?

The answer that is most commonly given is "budgetary considerations". Administrators claim that they can't afford to hire enough regular teachers. But when the cost savings from hiring contingent faculty are put into interest bearing accounts and other money making ventures to generate funds that could be used to hire regular faculty but in fact will not be used to support instruction in any way, we see that not hiring enough regular teachers is just another way that administrators cheat the educational mission of the institution they are hired to serve.

It is important that tenured faculty realize that we are not the enemy, in spite of administrations' efforts to foster that idea, but rather allies to be cultivated in their struggles against administrations' attempts to starve instructional programs, and that it is in their best interests for us to have the job security to be able to support them. Tenured faculty are the only ones who have the job security to oppose the efforts of administrators to cut corners at the expense of the instructional program. It is important to have a strong tenured faculty to defend instructional programs.

## **2. Administration**

This brings us to the next question of why are administrations battling against faculty? There are several answers. The first is the bottom line mentality of the corporate model which requires that they minimize costs and maximize profits. However, on closer examination, one finds that fiscal responsibility will get trumped by the desire for power. The question then becomes, how did this monolithic cohort of power hungry penny pinchers get control of our institutions? Who is behind this organizational effort which is achieving global proportions? The only possible suspects are multinational corporations, who, it should be remembered, are in total control of the mainstream media and have a huge influence in government.

It would be overly simplistic and a mistake to think that corporations are totally evil. They provide an incredible amount of goods, services, and jobs. They realize that they need universities to provide them with a work force which will enable them to function; however, they see it to be in their best interests to have us simply do whatever they want us to, such as give them all our money, and not to ask too many questions. They do not seem to realize that it is necessary to have people who can solve the problems which will be confronting us in the years to come if we and they hope to avoid disaster, and that that requires an independent faculty dedicated to developing students' critical thinking capabilities. All they see is faculty opposing their agenda.

The question still remains, however, how did administrations become the agents of the corporate agenda? The governing boards of educational institutions are selected by political processes. Corporations have developed a great deal of expertise in influencing political processes. This, coupled with the fact that the faculty have largely abandoned the field in the selection of board members has allowed neocon interests to get control of the educational agenda.

So, the appointment of members of governing boards emerges as an absolutely key battlefield in the War Against Education, and the fact that corporate influence mongers have had this field mostly to themselves explains a great deal of the problems we are discussing. While administrators may be impervious to arguments based upon long term economic stability of society as a whole, not all elected officials are. They can be influenced by the opinion of their constituents. In public institutions selection of members of governing boards is generally a political process whether it be by direct election of board members by the residents of their districts or appointment by governors or other elected officials. Faculty provide a powerful source of personnel for political action if well organized. An important component of the political action agenda of

representatives of all faculty, contingent and non contingent, needs to be the selection of members of governing boards.

### **3. Students**

The most obvious effects of The War on Education include students not being able to get their classes and the proliferation of contingent faculty. Contingent faculty and students, as the victims in this War, need to form coalitions with tenured faculty who have the security to oppose administrations and stand up for quality education.

The reason that students are forced to play musical chairs with their classes at registration is that when the administration is faced with the decision of whether to offer enough sections of the heavily enrolled classes or to have a little money left over at the end of the year, they have been choosing to save money. While, generally speaking, fiscal responsibility is a valuable trait, we need to ask where this money going? Obviously, it is being saved. What do universities do with money they save? They doesn't put it into a savings account that will only get 2 or 3% interest. It is invested much more aggressively. Unfortunately, the proceeds of these investments are not used to fund instruction. They are used to generate more money that will not be used for instruction. The net effect is that money which could be used for instruction is being invested to make money that will not be used for instruction.

This is not only making it harder for students to get classes is also at least partly responsible for the substandard working conditions of lecturers. Not only does the administration want to save a few dollars by hiring faculty into lower paying jobs, by cutting down on lecturers' job security it makes it harder for lecturers to support the instructional program.

Students are a major stake holder in the quality of their education. Not only is the number of students large enough to represent a significant voting bloc, but many students have family and friends who also care about the quality of their education. We all need to work together to encourage the governor to appoint trustees who would place a higher priority on instruction than in generating investment capital and will work cooperatively with faculty and students instead of in opposition to them.

In Campus Equity Week activities in the California State University system, we had very good success turning students out to our activities by focusing our message around student issues of lack of classes and higher fees. It helped very much that our students were quite upset about these issues and the fact that some of us gave them extra credit in our classes for attending the events. Naturally it was important to come up with reasons why attendance at the events was a legitimate pedagogical exercise, but the fact that CSU lecturers demonstrated that they could turn out hundreds of students on even the smallest of campuses made an important point.

### **4. Contingent Faculty Ourselves**

However, the most important audience in our efforts is ourselves. As I reflect on Campus Equity Week experiences, I keep coming to the conclusion that the major goal of Campus Equity Week is to develop additional activism among contingent faculty. How to accomplish this should be a major topic of discussion.

There is a great deal of consciousness raising among contingent faculty that needs to be done. First, there are challenges in organizing lecturers: fear, fatalism, ignorance, isolation, and elusiveness. However, if we continue to suffer in silence, we will undoubtedly continue to suffer. We need to make some noise so that the glass ceiling, like the walls of Jericho, will come tumbling down.

Organizationally, contingent faculty are a sleeping giant. It will take activities to get us organized. Campus Equity Week is an activity of lecturers organized by lecturers for lecturers. We can use it to develop communication networks among the lecturers on our campuses and to get the message out about the nature of our situation. We can use that message to build coalitions with our natural allies: permanent faculty, students, and the public.