

2018

Reflections on the Contingent Workforce at Catholic Colleges

Matthew J. Gaudet
Santa Clara University, mgaudet2@scu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/eng_grad



Part of the [Ethics in Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

M.J. Gaudet. (2018). Reflections on the Contingent Workforce at Catholic Colleges. In E. Brigham & S. Black (Eds), *Catholic Identity in Context: Vision and Formation For the Common Good*, Lane Center Series, Volume 6. University of San Francisco Press, pp. 33-44.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Engineering at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in General Engineering by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact rscroggin@scu.edu.

**Catholic Identity in
Context: Vision and
Formation for the
Common Good**



Reflections on the Contingent Workforce at Catholic Colleges

MATTHEW J. GAUDET¹

Here and now...the Lord's disciples are called to live as a community, which is the salt of the earth and the light of the world. We are called to bear witness to a constantly new way of living together in fidelity to the Gospel. Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of community! – Pope Francis, Evangelii Gaudium 92

Contingent or “adjunct” professors are highly educated and often excellent educators, yet they are suffering from a nationwide epidemic of low wages, a lack of benefits, poor working conditions, short and sporadic contracts, and—to make ends meet—long commutes that often involve two, three, or even more institutions. This story of contingency on American campuses is fast becoming a well-tread narrative, not only in periodicals that focus on academic life (e.g. the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Vitae*, *Insidehighered.com*), but also more recently, in mainstream news outlets as wide spanning as the *Washington Post*, *the New York Times*, *CNN*, *Forbes*, *The Atlantic*, and *Salon*. Gawker.com even did an 8-part series on the struggles of

¹ Matthew J. Gaudet teaches theological and philosophical ethics at the University of San Francisco and is currently serving as Co-chair of the Society of Christian Ethics Task Force in Contingency. His research lies at the intersection of Moral Theology with Political & Social Theory, with a particular interest in the topics of disability ethics, ethics of war and peace, and university ethics.

contingent faculty. Like an ancient myth that gets told and retold throughout the centuries, the setting and the names may change but the story always retains certain core elements: the lack of benefits, the shabby pay, and, of course, the “administration” cast as the villain. The moral also remains consistent: if we want to help the contingent professor, we need to support unionization of contingent faculty and collective bargaining in order to gain leverage against the (evil) administrators.

This story is told about Catholic universities just as often as it is any other university, and aptly so, since Catholic universities employ roughly the same percentage of contingent faculty as the national average. Furthermore, the solution of unionization fits neatly with a cursory reading of Catholic social teaching, which, from its inception in the wake of the industrial revolution, has been pro-union. But does unionization suffice to offer a truly Catholic response to the contingency epidemic in the American academy? In this essay, I will argue that while unionization is a fine first step, it ought not be the whole of a Catholic response to the contingency crisis. It is incumbent upon Catholic colleges, which espouse to be communities inspired by the Catholic vision for the common social life, to actively work to be more inclusive of contingent faculty.

The Economic and Social Status of Contingent Faculty

In an age where we have come to dogmatically accept the belief that education is the path to better prospects in life, it seems reasonable to make the correlate claim that those who hold advanced and terminal degrees should occupy the safest rungs of our socio-economic ladder. And yet, adjunct professors collecting food stamps or working “part-time” at multiple schools just to make ends meet are both regularly occurring realities in this country. Adjunct faculty members face the possibility of losing all or part of their livelihood each and every semester. Anyone who has ever worked in a university setting knows

that courses get dropped from the schedule as a regular practice for any number of reasons. Moreover, contingent professors are often bumped out of their classes not only if *their* courses don't fill, but also if a tenure-line faculty member needs a course. That means that when a tenure-line sabbatical is cancelled at the last minute or a tenure-line faculty member is unable to draw enough students to fill their own courses, or if the department decides it needs course A more than it needs course B, it is usually a contingent faculty member that bears the consequences of those realities. The fact is that to be contingent is to be economically vulnerable.

However, the economic woes of contingent faculty are only the tip of a very large iceberg. Beneath these issues looms the deeper, and more foundational matter of the social and professional marginalization of 71% of the American professorate. Even if contingent faculty are not bumped from their courses, they typically are last on the list when it comes to scheduling their courses. This means teaching at the least desirable times. It also often means not being hired until days before the semester begins, allowing little time to prepare. These realities are especially problematic for the "freeway fliers," those part-time contingent faculty who struggle to cobble together courses at multiple schools just to make ends meet, and thus, are often those most in need of a particular course time.

Furthermore, to be contingent is to be ill equipped with the tools necessary to do their job effectively. Where tenure-line professors are typically issued a computer that is networked to university servers and printers and is compatible with classroom technology, contingent faculty members are expected to purchase their own computer hardware, which may or may not be compatible elements of the university network. For one costly example, university-issued computers are generally networked to department printers, but personal computers are not, which means contingent faculty often need to pay for their own printing for class. Moreover, while tenure-line faculty tend to be issued charge codes for copiers that get billed to their department, many contingent faculty do not have such a luxury, leading many to pay for their photocopies out of pocket.

While tenure-line professors can typically count on their university to provide them with an private office space, contingent faculty members typically have to carry their all of their personal belongings and teaching materials with them throughout campus, are forced to meet with students in public locations like libraries, coffee shops, or cafeterias, and have no quiet space to do lesson planning, let alone research or writing. Furthermore, while tenure-line faculty members can offer students an office phone number as well as drop in office hours in a physical office, contingent faculty members often resort to distributing their personal cell phone number, so that students can contact them by phone or text as they travel between campuses and work out of public spaces.

Moreover, while tenure-line faculty generally have business cards and letterhead provided to them, it is extremely rare that contingent faculty are provided such tools. This prevents the contingent faculty member from being able to present himself or herself professionally in the world at large. It also has acute effects on contingent teaching. Since many publishers require requests for exam copies of books to be printed on official letterhead or to include a business card as an assurance that the individual is actually a faculty member, a contingent faculty member lacks these tools loses access to systems like examination or desk copies of textbooks. Thus, they are forced to pay out of their own pocket to either examine books for new courses or explore fresh titles for old courses.

Finally, spaces like faculty clubs and dining rooms and campus gym facilities are where community is built outside of the classroom. Events like art exhibits, speakers, and sporting events are essential part of the university culture. Yet access to these spaces and events are often offered to tenure-line faculty free of charge, while contingent faculty, if granted access at all, are asked to pay a fee or enter a lottery. Even more consequentially, contingent faculty are routinely excluded from department and other policy-making meetings and from holding positions on policy making bodies such as the faculty senate. There are several factors that contribute to the low rate of contingent faculty participation in curricular and other policy meetings. The first

is that contingent faculty are simply not invited. In many cases, this can be a function of inertia from an earlier time when the adjunct population was entirely comprised a small contingent of industry professionals with full time jobs off campus. In other cases, exclusion from meetings is intended as a kindness on the part of the tenure-line faculty, for whom committee work is the drudgery of academic life.

On the other hand, even when given the opportunity join department meetings, many contingent faculty opt out of such opportunities. As with scheduling classes, scheduling meetings at a time when contingent faculty can participate can be extremely difficult. Moreover, since many contingent faculty are paid by the course, the choice to participate in meetings outside of their contractual obligations constitutes unpaid labor. Finally, as with any form of privilege, the rarity of contingent faculty membership on university committees of importance means that when a contingent faculty member does make it on to one of these committees, any concerns raised that are specific to contingent faculty are often minimized, bracketed, or dismissed.

By definition, something that is “adjunct” is “a thing added to something else as a *supplementary rather than an essential part.*” There was a time when “adjunct” referred to the role teaching played in the professor’s life, since most adjunct faculty were teaching on the side of, or in retirement from, a different professional career. Today, the term points more readily to the relationship between the professor and his or her university. To be an adjunct member of a college faculty is to be supplementary, tangential, easy to cast off, and not worth investing in. In short, to be an “adjunct” or “contingent” is to be socially, politically, and professionally marginalized on campus, and unionizing to bargain for increased pay and benefits will not change this fact.

The Professor ‘Born’ Contingent

For Catholic schools committed to living mission-centered on a concept of Christian Community, there is another way. While Jesus

never offered us a “Sermon on the Campus Green,” there can be little doubt that Jesus had a concern for the marginalized. From the tax collectors he ate with to the prostitutes he socialized with; from the lepers he healed to the adulterer he protected and then forgave, so much of Christ’s ministry was aimed at restoring the communion between the marginalized and the community. All it takes is a little analogical imagination to recognize how this model applies to the professional and social marginalization of contingent professors. Perhaps the most apropos gospel example is the story of the man born blind in John chapter 9. As Sandra Schneiders has pointed out, “the miracle itself is recounted extremely briefly (two verses!) but the consequences of the healing...take up the next 33 verses.” To wit, this is not a story about a physical healing, but story about how we react when our social and theological norms and expectations are disturbed. In the field of disability studies, there is an important difference between “impairment” and “disability.” Impairment is a physiological and/or cognitive condition—the lack of sight, mobility, or cognitive ability. Disability, on the other hand, refers to the social reality and consequences of having an impairment in a particular society. The Blind man in the biblical story lacked sight (i.e. he had an impairment) but he was socially relegated to be a beggar (i.e. he had a disability) because of how ancient Jewish and Roman society responded to his impairment.

After being healed by Jesus, the man immediately returns to his community seeking the communion that had been denied him while he was blind. To his community, however, he had always been a blind beggar. They had no means for understanding him in any other way. First, they question whether it is, in fact the blind man, or whether it is just someone who *looks like* him. When that hypothesis fails, they turn to the Pharisees, as keepers of the law and the leaders of the synagogue, to make sense of this new reality.

The Pharisees, wary of Jesus’ popularity, questioned the legitimacy of the miracle by confronting the man’s parents. The parents acknowledged that the man has been born blind, but then offered no more defense of their son. The gospel author explicitly notes

that they hold their silence out of fear of being banished from the synagogue if they acknowledged the miracle. Here, we see evidence that active membership in the synagogue community was understood as a privilege, not a right, and the keepers of the privilege were the Pharisees.

Finally, there is the element of sin, which serves as the condition that may bar entry into the community and deny the voice of the outcast. At the outset of the story, Jesus' followers ask him "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2), reflecting the commonly held notion at the time that impairment or disease were the result of sinfulness. Later, the Pharisees use this same idea when they chastise the formerly blind man for his acknowledgement of the miracle: "You were born totally in sin, and are you trying to teach us?" (John 9:34). Jesus, of course, rejects the axiom of impairment causing sinfulness ("Neither he nor his parents sinned" he tells the disciples), but more importantly, Jesus identifies the hypocrisy of Pharisees, who are themselves "blind" to the divine truth, acting as gatekeepers to the synagogue community.

Today, we find absurd the notion that physical impairments result from sinfulness. Thus, exclusion of those with disabilities from our communities on the basis of sinfulness seems equally absurd. However, this has not led our modern social structures to be less exclusionary. We are just as guilty as our predecessors of seeing those with disabilities as mere objects of charity, rather than active members of our community. Today, we have simply replaced the sinfulness axiom with a modern notion of pragmatic meritocracy. In our capitalist age, we now exclude on the basis of perceived capabilities. That is, showing deference to someone with more ability over someone with less is socially normative. Certainly efforts to thwart such norms do exist in our modern society (e.g. the Americans with Disabilities Act, the Education for all Handicapped Children Act) but the very necessity of such laws points to existence of the social forces that I am describing.

Meritocracy, of course, is also the conventional structure for faculty promotion within academia. Professors get tenure and get promoted

from Assistant to Associate to Full Professor based on the merits of one's academic record. Scholars are also hired into their initial tenure-track positions based on merit, or at least some calculation of the potential for scholarly achievement based on supposedly related merits of a top academic pedigree and the recommendation of top scholars in the field. Ostensibly, then, those who end up filling out the contingent ranks did not merit inclusion in the tenure-line ranks. This presumption is further underscored by the fact that in the highly meritocratic university system, contingent positions generally rank below even the greenest assistant professor, regardless of how long the contingent scholar has been teaching or what success they have had in that post. In short, contingent professors are considered "less than" because, ostensibly, they did not do enough to merit a tenure-track position.

The problem is that this view belies the trend toward contingency in academia as a whole. In 1969, tenure-line faculty comprised 78.3% of faculty positions in American higher education. Today that number hovers around 30%. This means that more than two-thirds of those currently holding contingent faculty positions would be in tenure-line positions if the tenure ratios of previous generations were still maintained, or conversely, if today's market conditions had existed in the 1970s, 80s and 90s, half of scholars hired onto the tenure-track during those years would have ended up in contingent positions instead. Meritocracy arguments are also blind to the fact that "contingent" is not a monolithic identity, even if all bear the stigma of the role equally. The fact is that, many contingent faculty have *chosen* to work part time in favor of dedicating time to family needs or other professional pursuits. The decision to seek part time work, however, says nothing of a professor's scholarly ability. Nor does it warrant the stigma that comes with being labeled "adjunct." The reality is that many part-time professors have been successfully working in their field for decades, far outstripping their tenure-track peers. And yet, contingent faculty generally make less money, possess less benefits, occupy a lower status, and have less power than those on the tenure-track.

Contingency and Creating a Catholic Community on Campus

What is a Catholic school to do today, in the face of these new social realities of academia? Certainly Catholic schools, by virtue of their Catholic identity, bear an extra responsibility to the marginalized. More specifically, Catholic social teaching is unequivocal about the right for workers to unionize. However, as I have already noted, pay and benefits, the issues that unionization can help most with, are only the tip of the iceberg. The greater concern, beneath the surface, is cultural: how can a community claim to be rooted in Christian values and yet still professionally and socially marginalize part of its population?

As I have noted, the story of the man born blind is not primarily about healing. Rather it is a lesson about community. The synagogue was the center of Jewish life during this period and thus, the Pharisees, as the keepers of that status, wielded great power to either welcome or reject individuals from participation in Jewish society. The man's desire to return to full synagogue life after being healed as well as the man's parents' fears of being "kicked out of the synagogue" both indicate the importance of maintaining good standing with regard to participation in the synagogue. Jesus, however, offers a contrasting view of community—one that did not have ingroup and outgroup divisions. He rejects the socialized notion of (presumed) "sinfulness" that has kept the blind man marginalized. In the process, he implicitly welcomes man back into the community, even as the townspeople, the Pharisees, and even the man's own parents struggle to do the same.

Carrying this example forward, we, today, need to reject the socialized notion of (presumed) "merit" that undergirds the contingent system and keeps the contingent professor on the margins of university and academic life. Why is the tenure-line professor more deserving than his or her contingent brethren of an office, a university issued computer, letterhead and business cards, or access to the faculty dining room? Why should a tenure-line professor get priority in the scheduling process or a seat on the faculty senate? If

the primary reason is a fabled notion of meritocracy, then we need to rethink our Catholic priorities.

It is also important to note that while Jesus rebukes the Pharisees explicitly, the story of the man born blind contains an implicit critique of the others in the town as well. The story reveals the parents of the man as particularly craven, turning a cold shoulder to their own son's struggle in the face of the Pharisees' questioning. In today's Catholic colleges, increasing pay and providing basic benefits are the metaphorical equivalent of curing the man's blindness, in that the power to cure these ills is beyond the capacity of most people on campus and perhaps even a financial impossibility on some campuses. However, the story appears to imply that even if the townsfolk were not capable of healing the blind man, they could have acted differently towards him, first when he was blind, and then all the more so when he appears to them cured.

So how do we serve contingent faculty on our contemporary college campuses? Catholic community building is not done in large miraculous events of corresponding rarity. Nor is it accomplished through collective bargaining alone. Rather, constructing community is done every moment of every day with local, and even personal decisions of inclusion, acceptance, and equality amongst faculty peers of all ranks. This begins by breaking down structural barriers that keep tenure-line and contingent faculty separated. Within your department, make sure contingent faculty are invited to department meetings and social events and fight for them to be included on important committees and represented in the faculty senate. Make sure all contingent faculty are listed on the departmental website or bulletin board, not in a separate list of adjunct faculty, but as part of the faculty that comprise the department. When new contingent faculty join the department, make sure they have access to and know how to use the copiers and the printers.

Department chairs can schedule contingent faculty's courses early (to allow for planning) and with priority over other faculty. If a department has funds for speakers, give due consideration to inviting contingent faculty to speak. They can also spend department funds to

provide for conference travel, ensure contingent faculty have business cards. More than anything, department heads can advocate for all members of their department.

On personal level, make efforts to share the privileges of rank, by offering to share your office, parking space, or voicemail box with a contingent colleague. Moreover, make an effort to know and befriend your contingent faculty peers. Learn their joys and hopes, their griefs and anxieties. Know their birthday and celebrate it. Know when they've lost a loved one and grieve with them. Ask about their research and their teaching and find ways to collaborate. Pray for them and ask them to pray for you.

Making this space on a personal level for contingent faculty to be peers, colleagues, and friends will also lead to understanding about the particular structural injustices faced by contingent faculty on your campus. For example, for some, exclusion from department meetings or representation in the faculty senate is understood as a lack of voice and a structural injustice. For others, overtaxed with high teaching loads at multiple schools or with teaching on top of another career or family care responsibilities, adding another meeting would be a burden, rather than an opportunity.

The list could go on and on, but in the end, no list will ever cover all of the ways to be a Christian community for those who would be marginalized. This, of course, is why Jesus himself taught in parables and led by example. And this is why the story of the man born blind is important to remember when building a university community.