

CHAPTER 13

BUILDING OUR OWN BRIDGES: A CASE STUDY IN CONTINGENT FACULTY SELF-ADVOCACY

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Threads: Self-Advocacy; Organizing Within and Across Ranks

Discussions of working conditions for non-tenure-track faculty often take one of two forms: Either they feature faculty members analyzing the problems of their condition, or they highlight tenured faculty or administrators who have helped improve contingent-faculty working conditions. Organizations such as AAUP address contingent-faculty problems and successes, but the voices heard frequently belong to non-contingent faculty, and the perspectives of the contingent faculty are often minimally present, at best, possibly creating the impression that the work towards shared governance and contingent-faculty participation is the responsibility of tenured faculty, with contingent faculty the grateful recipients of their efforts. In this chapter, we want to feature the perspective of contingent faculty in advocacy efforts.

Our own institution, American University, has been justifiably lauded for its progress in shared governance and treatment of contingent faculty over the last few years; a total of three sessions at the AAUP's conferences on governance dealt with the changes, and an article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reported on the increased participation in governance on the part of our contingent faculty (Schmidt, "Faculty"). These changes have resulted from collaboration between tenure-track and contingent faculty—but that collaboration itself resulted from the efforts of American's contingent faculty,¹ particularly the writing program faculty, to participate in university service and governance.

We argue, in fact, that contingent faculty in writing programs are among the best situated to advocate for contingent-faculty issues. Before the boom in con-

1 For the purpose of this chapter, "contingent faculty" will refer to full-time, non-tenure-track faculty; we use the term "adjunct" for our part-time faculty, who are outside the scope of this discussion, particularly because they recently unionized and ratified a separate contract with the university.

tingent faculty lines created a majority of non-tenured faculty at the nation's colleges and universities, non-tenure-line writing faculty were already there, along with language and mathematics instructors, staffing freshman courses. Writing faculty have been operating for years in what has historically been a low-status job, and in our case, that position led to a clear vision of our circumstances and the solidarity to do something about our situation. In this chapter, we will describe our own self-advocacy process, emphasizing three main components: faculty reputation, alliances with tenure-line faculty, and participation in teaching unit and university governance. We will also discuss our current successes and remaining challenges, and offer suggestions to other faculty. We believe that contingent faculty can advocate for themselves—if they take advantage of and create the conditions in which they can do so.

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

Located in Washington, DC, American is a private, liberal arts, doctoral-granting (AAUP-I) institution with a combined undergraduate and graduate student body of 12,000. The university comprises four professional schools, a law school, a school of extended studies, and a college of arts and sciences. Within that college, the College Writing Program is housed in the Department of Literature. All College Writing faculty are contingent or adjunct, with most classes taught by full-time faculty. Almost all the faculty who teach “literature” courses (as distinct from composition) are tenure-line, with a handful of contingent and adjunct faculty.

Over the past two decades, like most colleges and universities, AU has seen a steady growth in full-time contingent faculty in teaching-only appointments. Before the year 2000, there were few full-time contingent faculty, and those faculty were limited by a five-year cap on their employment. Once multi-year appointments after five years became available in 2000 through faculty-senate legislation, our numbers grew significantly, and as of 2009 we had long-serving faculty who had earned reputations as excellent teachers, with a high concentration of such faculty in our writing program. As Maria Maisto notes, “stabilization” leads to contingent faculty “establishing institutional roots deep enough to build the kind of knowledge and relationships that facilitate both commitment and reform” (192), as well as building “relationship[s] between contingent faculty members and the institutions and communities in which they work” (193). Indeed, Maisto says, case studies indicate that “contingent faculty leaders who have been able to plant strong roots in their institutions and communities are usually the most successful change agents” (193). While the very fact of contingency works against such roots, Maisto makes clear that

they are at the same time essential.²

Over the past decade, non-tenure-track faculty—especially in the full-time ranks—grew significantly. As of academic year 2013-2014 American University employed 495 tenure-line, 353 full-time non-tenurable, and 796 adjunct faculty, which means AU's non-tenure-track faculty make up 48 percent of all full-time faculty appointments. In 2007, a new provost took the helm at our institution and immediately sought to raise the research profile of the institution. In order to accomplish this goal, tenure-line faculty went from a 3-2 to a 2-2 teaching load—which produced a need for more full-time contingent faculty.³ The provost recognized the implications of this changed faculty make-up for the university, and soon after arriving, he began to refer to “career term faculty.” As Adrienne Kezar and Cecile Sam note, such recognition matters: For positive change for contingent faculty to occur, “institutions would have to acknowledge two ideas. The first idea is that a change in the faculty composition has occurred, making the current policies and practices for faculty inapplicable to the majority of faculty. The second idea is that change needs to occur for institutional policies and practices to align with the new faculty majority, because ignoring the issue is unsustainable; long-term inaction would lead to negative impacts on the professoriate, the institution, and the students” (30). We thus found ourselves in an institutional context that was in many ways typical but that had the perhaps atypical advantage of some awareness of and support for contingent faculty at the highest administrative level. And in 2009, with a major revision of our faculty manual in the works, we had our first opportunity to weigh in on the “policies and practices” that most affected us.

ADVOCACY AND CHANGE

In 2009, we had an increasingly stable population of contingent faculty, an administration that was at least beginning to acknowledge us as more than just “temporary” faculty, and an opportunity in the form of the faculty manual revision. At the same time, we had a recent history, even within our department, of marginalization in department decisions and a commonly held view that we were, in the words of a former department chair, the “cheap labor” supporting the “real” work of the department. As is the case in many institutions, we faced implicit and explicit barriers to full participation as faculty in the department and university. But one of our biggest barriers was our own timidity, our sense that we were neither qualified nor welcome to engage in the larger work of the

2 Degrees of contingent-faculty participation in governance vary widely across institutions; we acknowledge that the favorable climate at AU resulted in part from factors that were not under our control but that nevertheless benefited us.

3 Concurrently, AU was striving to reduce the number of adjunct faculty.

university. So in order to exploit the changing conditions of the university, we had to overcome that timidity, educate ourselves in the workings of the university, and make inroads at every available opportunity. The three main components of this work were faculty reputation, alliances with tenure-line faculty, and participation in unit and university governance. These components matter because they all pertain to visibility; contingent faculty are often overlooked or ignored. We had to establish ourselves as active, expert faculty members deserving of personal, professional, and policy recognition.

FACULTY REPUTATION

While Maisto rightly points to faculty stability as leading to alliances and the power to enact change, longevity alone isn't enough; we still had to prove ourselves—not through a tenure process, but through a process that lacked codified procedures or clear rules and expectations. In our College Writing Program, we took advantage of the inattention on the part of the tenure-line literature faculty (who saw the literature courses as the real work of the department) to fashion a strong curriculum that served a large number of undergraduates, and we could point to our success as teachers in terms that the university administration valued: while we gave some of the lowest grades in the university, we had, on average, among the highest student evaluations. But we were also able to develop a set of professional standards that reflected the values of our field to use in the reappointment and promotion of writing faculty. For contingent faculty university wide, as the university's undergraduate retention rate increased and NSSE ratings of freshman satisfaction rose, by 2012 it became clear that the large percentage of the full-time faculty who were non-tenured were making an impact on the university's increasing reputation for excellence. One lesson we learned was that with faculty retention and teaching excellence comes a modicum of respect, not just from tenure-line faculty, but from deans and administrators; in other words, the "relationships" that Maisto describes arose because our capable teaching allowed us to be seen as something akin to "faculty."⁴

ALLIANCES

Over time, as many contingent faculty became long-term faculty who had strong reputations as committed teachers (and sometimes as productive scholars, too),

4 Some have argued that the increased reliance on contingent faculty has hurt student learning and engagement and that this harm can be used in persuading administrators to improve contingent-faculty conditions. At AU, however, contingent faculty's success with students was a persuasive point in our arguments to administrators and tenure-track colleagues.

we found and created opportunities to work with tenure-track faculty across the university. Because our writing program operates within the Department of Literature, the tenure-line “literature” faculty saw us at department meetings and were familiar with our work. Also, our position as composition instructors, teaching academic writing applicable to a number of disciplines, gave us ways to reach out to colleagues across the university. For example, for the university’s annual in-house teaching conference, we created multidisciplinary panels to give presentations about teaching writing in different disciplines; on one of these panels, we developed a relationship with a math professor who would go on to chair the senate subcommittee that revised the faculty manual and later become the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Studies. Such initially innocuous connections over time became valuable—even indispensable—partnerships, and many of us began to be seen as individual faculty members, with our own expertise and commitment to the institution, not just as part of the virtually invisible mass of non-tenure-track faculty. And just as importantly, we became acquainted with tenure-track faculty as individuals, not just as part of a privileged group.

GOVERNANCE

As we’ve noted, College Writing faculty faced the kinds of implicit and explicit barriers to participation in governance that many contingent faculty must confront. As our program’s faculty grew and became more stable, we began regularly attending department meetings, and from there, we offered to participate in departmental committees. AU, like many institutions, has some difficulty finding faculty to take on service obligations, so our participation was often welcome—and over time, became expected. As we worked with more people across the university, we expanded our participation, serving on university committees that formed policy and hired administrators. For example, when a search committee for a dean was formed, we made sure that one of our faculty was on the ballot—and then we lobbied our contingent colleagues to vote for that person. These efforts helped us form even more alliances, gain credibility, demonstrate our commitment to the university, and develop political insights and knowledge.

However, opportunities to participate in governance have been mixed at AU, with some departments welcoming contingent-faculty participation and others forbidding it. At the same time, the focus on research productivity for tenure-line faculty has put contingent faculty in administrative positions, such as directing programs, managing labs, and directing artistic productions, and has created opportunities for university service, such as committee work, senate service, and independent work with students. And contingent faculty across the university are taking notice of those departments, such as ours, where their col-

leagues have full participation in unit governance. Increasingly, contingent-faculty participation in the work of the university is becoming normalized.

THE PROCESS OF CHANGE

As the writing faculty and other contingent faculty across the university were becoming increasingly active and visible, the moment for action came in 2009 when the faculty senate began a comprehensive and long-overdue revision of the faculty manual. The old version of the faculty manual essentially codified the invisibility of contingent faculty—indeed, contingent faculty policies took up one paragraph of a lengthy document. While the faculty themselves were active, engaged, and successful members of the institution, the institutional policies had not yet caught up to the realities of the composition of the faculty as a whole. AU was not unusual in this discrepancy, though; John G. Cross and Edie N. Goldenberg, in their study of non-tenure-track faculty, found that even as those faculty became the “new faculty majority,” many tenure-track faculty, administrators, and human-resources personnel paid little attention to them: “Who are the faculty who teach undergraduates on these select campuses, and what are their employment arrangements? One of the major surprises of our study is that nobody seems to know” (3).

The faculty-manual revision process would prove informative in this regard. A draft of the revised manual was distributed to the campus community. The writing program’s faculty were taken aback that the proposed extensive changes to the manual did not address AU’s contingent faculty. In fact, the one paragraph that had previously described us remained with no additions or revisions. It was as if the university still couldn’t see that at that time over one-third of its full-time faculty labored right alongside its tenure-line professors and deserved equitable attention.

Thus, everyone involved was surprised when a large group of contingent faculty and their tenure-line supporters attended the faculty-manual town hall meeting reserved for contingent faculty —what would be the largest turnout of any of the faculty manual committee’s town halls. It was a lively and at times contentious gathering, but at the meeting’s close, the committee urged us to propose specific changes to the manual’s contingent faculty language. It was a first for non-tenured full-time faculty at American: not only had we been invited, as a class, to attend a meeting about university policies governing our positions, we were also being asked to define our concerns and propose solutions. In one day, a previously invisible group suddenly made itself known.

Over the next six months, a small group of writing faculty, who had all worked at the university for some time and had earned the respect of their ten-

ure-line colleagues, proposed changes to the faculty manual sections concerning full-time contingent faculty that included a promotion track, contract lengths, specific criteria for reappointment, and equal access to benefits and policies enjoyed by the tenure-line faculty.⁵ We also pushed for language guaranteeing academic freedom for those without tenure.⁶ Our experiences over the previous few years helped us in this project: we'd earned respect and credibility by demonstrating our commitment to the university and the students, we'd forged alliances with tenure-track faculty members working on the manual revision (particularly the chair of that committee), and we had some knowledge of the workings of the university so we knew what to ask for. The committee not only adopted all of our proposals, they expanded some of them to accommodate the wide variety of contingent-faculty positions across the university. After faculty senate ratification, faculty vote, and board of trustees ratification, the revised faculty manual, with a long section on contingent faculty, was finalized. In the biggest sense, this document recognized, for the first time, that the university possessed a dedicated teaching faculty that was interested in pursuing these teaching-only positions as academic careers.

CURRENT STATUS AND CHALLENGES THAT REMAIN

The revision and ratification of the faculty manual, which at long last recognized the presence of the majority of faculty, was the largest and most significant change that we've seen in our years at AU. But those of us involved in advocacy didn't view these new policies as the last step in our work; instead, we saw them as the groundwork for changes not just in the language used to describe us and our work but in our actual working conditions and roles in the university.

For example, the new faculty-manual policies inspired a number of questions about how to implement them; a senate committee was formed to create implementation recommendations—which was another opportunity for contingent faculty to push for positive change (multiple contingent faculty were on this committee). We proposed—and got—a dedicated seat on the faculty senate for a contingent-faculty member—an opportunity for contingent faculty

5 The lack of awareness and knowledge of contingent faculty can sometimes work to their advantage: A policy vacuum can also be seen as an opportunity to craft new policy, which is often easier than trying to change entrenched policies and attitudes.

6 Of course, as the AAUP has noted, there is no true academic freedom without tenure, so this language offered just a thin layer of protection and served perhaps more of a symbolic purpose. At the same time, while we're under no illusions that contingent faculty have academic freedom equivalent to that of tenured faculty, the new language at least provides the grounds for contesting violations of academic freedom.

to have a voice in university policy.⁷ And we have earned some tangible rewards: contingent faculty can now earn promotions, more money is available to them for professional development, they have greater protection in cases of financial exigency, and, in the case of College Writing faculty, we successfully argued for a market adjustment in our salaries.

Our work is ongoing, of course. Another iteration of the senate's committee on contingent faculty continues to advocate for better and more consistent working conditions across the university. And a college-level taskforce recently produced a lengthy report detailing the lengths we must go before contingent faculty are treated equitably—as faculty.

So while we've seen positive and heartening changes at AU, and it's been exciting to have been so much a part of those changes, we also see many areas in which we still must work for improvement. For example, even though our status is officially better within the university, hierarchical attitudes persist, to our detriment. Contingent faculty in most institutions face prejudices, as Kezar points out: “non tenure-track faculty are considered to have lesser qualifications, to be less competitive for faculty jobs, to be inferior teachers, to not understand the research process, and to lack the knowledge necessary to contribute toward governance” (Kezar, “Needed” 18). While there is a variety of reasons for such prejudices (for example, at AU, contingent faculty are hired without the intense vetting process used for tenure-track hires), we suspect that these attitudes arise out of tenure-line faculty's unfamiliarity with our contributions to our students and the institution as a whole and out of the tenure-track fear of contingency—that we are some dreadful, growing force just waiting to take over all the jobs. Even those tenure-track faculty who might not fear contingent faculty and might genuinely care about us as faculty members often inadvertently reveal their view of us as “lesser.” In the *Chronicle of Higher Education* article on governance changes at AU, a tenured professor praised the changes by saying, “We are treating [contingent] faculty like real people. They may be second-class people, but at least they are real people” (Schmidt, “Faculty” np). The language here is telling; this faculty member both reinforces the class distinctions and the sense that contingent faculty are somehow not quite as legitimate as their tenured colleagues. And of course, these attitudes are widespread. Even those texts that are, overall, sympathetic to contingent faculty often reveal the authors' prejudices. For example, Cross and Goldenberg have an entire book about the plight of “off-track profs”—with a section detailing the risks they pose to governance: “With

7 While contingent faculty have served on the senate fairly regularly as representatives of academic units or committees, it has historically been difficult to get elected as an at-large senator if one is a contingent-faculty member. As a sign of the great changes over the past few years, the current chair of the faculty senate is a contingent-faculty member.

full voting rights comes the possibility that untenured specialists will sway votes on issues that are judged likely to affect their own conditions of employment” (133-34). The assumptions here are disturbing: that contingent faculty’s interests somehow run counter to the interests of tenure-track faculty (whose interests, presumably, are somehow “better”) and the good of the university.

Such comments sting, of course; as faculty members who are fully committed to our careers teaching students and to the university, and who conduct ourselves professionally, we don’t want to be characterized as second class or suspect. But emotional reactions aside, such attitudes should matter both to contingent faculty and to the university faculty as a whole because these hierarchical divisions work against our shared goals and against our ability to stand strong when faced with changes to our working conditions. In her article in *Academe*, Anne Cassebaum discusses this loss of collegiality using the terms of organized labor, saying, “When no one uses either *union* or *solidarity*, the administration more easily controls faculty” (n.p.). And in the same issue, Monica Jacobe talks about the necessity of all faculty speaking “collectively” to “align the public sense of the university with reality” (n.p.). As Steve Street asks in his *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, “So why can’t faculty members hang together on equity issues? What can stop this trend that has already divided and is about to conquer us?” (n.p.). At a time when higher education is increasingly under attack on a variety of fronts, we need to recognize our common goals, needs, and strengths instead of focusing on historical status distinctions.

We still face more concrete challenges, too, such as the bane of contingent faculty everywhere: numerical student evaluations of teaching. Despite faculty manual language that insists that personnel decisions cannot be based solely on evaluation numbers, contingent faculty get the message, both implicitly and explicitly, that when it comes to reappointment, numbers matter more than anything else. While we were able to use this emphasis on numerical evaluations to our advantage, we have also strived, within our program, to develop more substantive and meaningful evaluation measures. But these measures have not been consistently replicated among administrators evaluating us. We’ve also learned that other teaching units—in direct contradiction to faculty manual policy—only use student evaluations for reappointment decisions.

Moreover, this emphasis on evaluations, combined with our contingent status, in effect puts our supposed academic freedom out of reach. While the university might insist that yes, we have academic freedom, if students object to what we say, they’ll voice their displeasure numerically—and we will lose our jobs because of our ideas and opinions, or perhaps because we have criticized a student’s “voice.” This problem is creating a large population of faculty members who still want to teach students but who must entertain, please, and not disturb

them when doing so—hardly the rigorous and dynamic intellectual environment one would hope for.⁸

But the greatest remaining problem for most contingent faculty, in which all these other issues converge, is inadequate pay. In her *Academe* article, Jacobe describes professors who can't afford to send their children to college themselves. In our own program, we have experienced, full-time faculty who also work as bartenders or nannies in order to make ends meet. And the starting salary for full-time writing faculty puts them in the category of “working poor” in the DC area. These problems extend beyond the less-experienced contingent faculty, and more senior faculty find it difficult to envision a career at our institution when, after ten or fifteen years of employment, they still struggle to maintain a middle-class life. Thus far, our administration has resisted making these across-the-board inequities a priority, and if we are all meant to be university faculty, engaged in the shared endeavors of teaching students and fostering the creation of knowledge, there is an ethical problem: one group earns a comfortable living and the other struggles. There is also the problem of how contingent faculty, under such economic duress, can be expected to be excellent teachers who juggle planning dynamic lessons, responding to student writing, conferencing with students, and keeping abreast of developments in our field—much less participating in the new governance opportunities presented to them.

And the opportunity to participate in governance is, perhaps, a mixed blessing in terms of these ongoing problems. On the one hand, increased participation in governance can lead to the sort of self-congratulation and complacency that work against further progress: Why, you get to vote in department meetings, and you even have a seat on the faculty senate. Look how far you've come—why are you still complaining? Advice to managers often includes the idea that it's better to offer intangible rewards—better titles, for example—so they don't have to actually increase salaries. A seat on the faculty senate doesn't lead to enough pay so a colleague can quit her second job.

Except that it might. As we have noted, our increased credibility, alliances with other faculty, and participation in governance have led to tangible changes in policies and working conditions. Kezar and Sam quote a contingent-faculty member: “You will always be a side order of fries unless you participate in governance. Some contingent faculty think governance is a luxury and we should just focus on rights like benefits. But, if you are going to be a real member of the community, treated as a professional, and included, you must participate in governance” (40). And as Peter Schmidt has reported in the *Chronicle of Higher*

8 College writing faculty are fortunate in that we evaluate each other for reappointment and promotion, just as tenure-track faculty do; we found that once we won the right to review our colleagues, we were evaluated much more substantively, using extensive portfolios.

Education, a recent study indicates that non-tenure-track faculty “had made the most progress at colleges where they tried to transform the campus climate to be more inclusive of them, rather than simply fighting to change one employer practice at a time” (“When Adjuncts” n.p.). This type of transformation can only result when contingent faculty participate in the institution *as* faculty—faculty who are long-serving, collegial, and respected, who demand, implicitly and explicitly, to be seen as full-fledged members of the university faculty.

LESSONS LEARNED

Clearly, AU’s contingent faculty used their earned reputations, alliances with tenured faculty and administrators, and participation in unit and university governance to achieve recognition and most importantly, improvement in their working conditions. A benefit of concentrated, long-term advocacy has been that we can see much more clearly where we stand and what still needs to be done. We have also realized the necessity of paying attention to what is transpiring at other institutions, both nationally and regionally, and we’ve been encouraged by recent white papers published by committees tasked with reforming contingent-faculty working conditions at institutions such as University of Maryland, College Park and Virginia Polytechnic Institute. Three key lessons have become apparent from our work.

START SMALL

We’ve been realistic in focusing first on uncontroversial goals, such as governance, professional development, and promotion criteria. As Kezar rightly points out, “sometimes getting a change in place quickly builds momentum, so determining the ‘low-hanging fruit’ can be a helpful strategy” (“Needed” 21).

CREATE A DATA-DRIVEN ENVIRONMENT

Perhaps our biggest realization has been the importance of data collection. As Patricia Hyer points out, a “data-driven environment can help facilitate change by seeing problems and inequities within data collected and through interest in looking at models and benchmarks and comparing to other campuses” (129). But one has to ask the right questions. Two committees—one sponsored by the university senate and the other by the College of Arts and Sciences—issued data-intensive reports on AU’s contingent faculty. The senate report, chaired by a tenured faculty member, offered extensive and enlightening institutional data. However, the other report, based on institutional data and self-reported data

from approximately one hundred contingent faculty, uncovered two issues not recognized by the senate report: the majority of contingent faculty were serving more than five years on single-year contracts that offered little job security; and their salaries were not only far lower than their tenure-line colleagues, but also could not sustain them. The issues of multi-year contracts and salary equity are budget issues—issues that are likely more controversial than the advances we'd already achieved—and were a sober reminder that perhaps much more difficult advocacy work lay ahead. The awareness of these crucial issues for our contingent colleagues also has made us realize that we need to create an action plan if any progress is to be made on these fronts.

REALIZE THAT THE PROCESS IS FUNDAMENTALLY POLITICAL

Perhaps the most important lesson we can take from the decade of preparation and advocacy is the realization that change is a finely tuned political process. In our early years of advocating inside our teaching unit, we experienced the same learning process as faculty did at Villanova when advocating for change: “When they relied solely on logic, empathy, morality, or rationale, their proposed changes were often met with resistance. . . . One cannot underestimate the importance of maximizing existing relationships, advocating for needed changes, and actually gathering votes” (Kezar, “Building” 186). We built such relationships—by improving our reputation, creating alliances within our teaching unit and beyond, and participating wherever allowed in unit and university governance. But such a process takes time, and that time necessarily makes change a sometimes painfully slow process.

CONCLUSION

When we look back over the changes that have happened at AU over the past fifteen years, we are heartened that an academic institution such as ours, which is by nature tradition-bound, hierarchical, and risk averse, can adapt positively to a changed workplace environment that mirrors the national situation. But while a number of tenure-line colleagues worked willingly and hard to effect those adaptations, contingent faculty, such as those of us in the writing program, fought for years in our department for equal political rights, and the literature department, no more or less conservative than any other department, adapted, sometimes with some heat, to the reality that half of its full-time faculty were working off the tenure track. Those changes only came about because we were all colleagues who saw one another every day and who were part of a department that values democratic discourse and analytical thought. Proximity, however,

wasn't sufficient; our reputations as excellent teachers, our building of alliances with friendly tenure-track colleagues, and our strong participation in service and governance gave us leverage. And winning over our tenure-track departmental colleagues had two great outcomes: it taught us how to persuade an insular, conservative professoriate of the necessity of recognizing that the academic world had changed, and it gave us the confidence and ability to take the fight on behalf of all of our contingent faculty colleagues to the entire university.

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