

# Chapter 15. Reconsidering the Status of Contingency: Are These Really the Trenches?

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Lecturer. Assistant Professor. To those outside of academia, there is little to no recognition of the distinction between these academic ranks. But within U.S. academic circles, there is a huge disparity between them in terms of what they convey about job security, salary, privileges, and respect.

As continuing lecturers<sup>1</sup> in the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB) writing program, we'd like to share our experiences with building our careers as non-tenure-track, full-time university faculty members who enjoy significant job security, a livable wage, and access to a plethora of teaching, research, and service opportunities, both within and beyond our department and campus. And while technically our positions are considered contingent because they rely on programmatic need, our continuing lecturer status means that our contracts do not have an end date associated with them.

In this chapter, we hope to discuss the benefits of roles like ours and disrupt the commonly held perception that non-tenure-track positions are always and by definition inferior to tenure-track positions. As Eileen E. Schell points out in Seth Khan et al.'s edited collection *Contingency, Exploitation, and Solidarity: Labor and Action in English Composition*, "While the term contingent describes positions in which faculty members teach on short term contracts with low pay and little or no job security, inadequate office space, and challenging curricular and professional conditions, the idea of contingency fails to capture the true complexity of positions located off the tenure track" ("Foreword" x). Our story highlights an additional path for graduate students and early career professionals to consider, particularly because these positions are overlooked so often.

We begin by sharing our respective stories of how we came to be continuing lecturers and subsequently embraced that role—albeit with some initial trepidation. We then consider the many benefits our positions offer, despite the stigmatization of our rank. We close by discussing how these lectureships originated and

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1. The continuing lecturer title is used in the UC system to denote a lecturer who has passed a sixth-year excellence review and whose contract therefore does not have an ending date. We agree with Seth Kahn et al., who make the point that "names matter" and that titles "help identify local conditions and contexts" ("Introduction" 7); thus, we are using this localized title throughout our chapter.

arguing for the importance of a strong union and ethical administrators who are committed to maintaining them.

## The Future Looks Bright, So Long as It's on the Tenure Track

Our story begins in the fall of 2001. We met when we were both pursuing M.A. degrees in English at California State University, Northridge (CSUN), where we also served as TAs and adjunct instructors. Later, we both attended Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP), where we earned our doctorates in the composition and TESOL program. Now we work together in UCSB's independent writing program, where we both teach first-year and upper-division writing courses, and where we also mentor and train composition TAs.

Because the two of us have shared so many experiences in our academic lives as both graduate students and professionals, we have a collective story as well as respective ones. Our stories chronicle our individual paths to becoming continuing lecturers and consider the ways in which we had to overcome some deeply entrenched ideas about what our careers should look like. Ironically, these ideas led us both perilously close to missing out on what we were actually seeking in our professional lives.

### Jennifer's Story

After earning my M.A. in English at CSUN, I spent a year cobbling together an income as an adjunct at two different institutions within four different departments. I had been told as a TA that the life of the adjunct "freeway flyer" (an instructor who works at multiple schools) was not an easy one, and at this point I was discovering this for myself. Not only was it complicated to teach four to five completely different courses each semester, but the compensation was abysmal. Moreover, the only way to maintain health insurance was to secure at least three courses per semester at one institution.

I knew I needed to find a way out. My M.A. program had ingrained in me the idea that the solution was to get a Ph.D. and a tenure-track job, so that fall I applied to IUP's low-residency summer program in composition and TESOL. This program felt like a godsend, as it would allow me to continue teaching and living in California (where my extended family was) while still moving toward my goal of becoming an assistant professor somewhere.

A few months later, an assistant professor position opened up at the community college where I was teaching. Something like 140 people applied for this position, which entailed a 4/4 teaching load, significant committee work, and service and publication requirements in order to reach tenure. While it felt like somewhat of a long shot, given that I had not yet started my Ph.D. work, I applied, and I was pleased to be invited for an interview and teaching demonstration.

Around this same time, then-director of the UCSB writing program, Susan McLeod, posted an ad for a lecturer position on the WPA listserv. The ad said something about how some people used these lectureships as postdocs while others fell in love with the students and the campus culture and stayed forever. Having been thoroughly acculturated to see the tenure-track as the holy grail of academic life, I could not imagine how someone could settle for a lectureship over a tenure-track gig. After all, I was pursuing a Ph.D., which seemed to me a sure precursor to landing a tenure-track job. I imagined that if I could get this lectureship, I would keep it for a few years before going on the job market and pursuing what I envisioned would be my “real” job.

I applied to the UCSB job, and soon after having a brief telephone interview, I received an offer from the program for a two-year, renewable contract that could lead to a series of one- and two-year contracts prior to a sixth-year excellence review, which if passed would result in a permanent contract. I appreciated the fact that the contract was ostensibly renewable, and after asking how often these contracts were in fact renewed and gaining assurance that they generally were, I figured this was a pretty safe bet. I was also intrigued by the idea of working in an independent writing program, separate from the English department, as this meant I would be joining a group of 30-some full-time faculty members who were dedicated to teaching first-year and developmental composition along with a whole host of interesting upper-division writing courses.

At this point, I was fifth on the list at the community college, and that department was not ready to make any offers. Even so, a part of me really wanted to hold out for the possibility of being offered the community college job. This may sound crazy, as the lectureship offer was a sure thing and a definite step up from my then-status as an adjunct. On the other hand, the community college job was tenure-track. The starting salary was about \$20,000 higher than what the lectureship offered.

Moreover, because the community college job was at the college where I had earned my A.A. degree and where my parents had met some 30 years prior when they worked on the school newspaper together, it was a safe and comfortable place to imagine my future. All this aside, given that there were four applicants ahead of me, it was far from a sure thing.

Despite this little detail, I agonized over what to do. My friends and family outside of academia were, like me, enamored by the idea of the significantly higher salary the community college job offered. They also were not super keen on the idea of me accepting a job 100 miles away from the community in which I had been born and raised and where they all still lived, which the UCSB job was. Still, they were impressed by the fact that I had received the offer from UCSB, as they understood that a university teaching position carried with it a measure of respect, although they had no clue about the differences between a lectureship and an assistant professorship.

But three people in particular understood all of these nuances. The first was my thesis advisor, who was delighted and somewhat floored that I had received the UCSB offer, particularly as I was just beginning my Ph.D. work.<sup>2</sup>

The second was my best friend, who had recently earned tenure at a Cal State university and was pleased to see me pursuing a career in academia. She let me know in no uncertain terms that she regarded the lectureship as a far more illustrious opportunity than the community college position—despite the lower salary it offered—because it was at a University of California campus versus a community college (suggesting yet another hierarchical structure in addition to the tenure-track/non-tenure track divide). All these years later, she wryly admits to having been a little envious that I had managed to finagle an offer from a University of California institution.

The third person who encouraged me to jump at the UCSB lectureship was a full professor at CSUN who was nearing retirement. I had served as a TA for her the previous year, and at this point I was working with her as an adjunct. She sat me down one evening after class and talked me through the relative benefits and drawbacks of each job, pointing out that while the community college position offered both security and a higher salary, it would likely lock me in to a five-day-a-week schedule teaching the same few classes over and over to first- and second-year students forever, whereas the lectureship would open up all sorts of opportunities in terms of research, teaching, and service, something the community college simply could not offer.

While she made a compelling case, I had no way of knowing just how right she was. But her words—coupled with the increasingly inescapable fact that I did in fact have only one offer on the table—resonated with me and helped me make my decision. Within a few days of my conversation with her, I accepted the lectureship offer, perceiving this move as both a wonderful opportunity and a veritable stepping-stone to bigger and better things down the road.

## Nicole's Story

After earning my M.A. in the English department at CSUN, I was hired into the composition adjunct pool, and I ended up teaching composition as an adjunct faculty member there for 13 years. I decided not to go on for a Ph.D. right away. In that time, I began to grow professionally and to improve my teaching as I read scholarship about teaching writing in response to questions and problems that arose in my classes.

I was also asked by tenure-track faculty members to fill different leadership positions in the English department and related programs. I was hired as the

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2. Since the time I was hired in 2005, the job requirements have become more stringent. Applicants must now have completed all requirements for a Ph.D. except the dissertation, OR have a terminal degree (M.F.A., M.B.A, Ph.D.) when they apply.

assistant coordinator for the campus' writing exit exam. This was a paid position that helped me supplement my income as an adjunct faculty member. I was also asked to be the coordinator for the composition program's portfolio readings.

Being in these positions helped me see that I was capable of leadership within the field and that I perhaps wanted more from my career, which to me meant pursuing a Ph.D. and eventually a tenure-track position. After teaching writing at CSUN for five years, I applied and was accepted to IUP's doctoral program in composition and TESOL. Because of IUP's limited residency model, I could work on my Ph.D. during the summers and stay at CSUN and teach writing during the academic year; however, I decided to give up my administrative position.

Though I expected to go on the academic job market once I earned my Ph.D., I also started entertaining a dream of being hired into a tenure-track position in the composition program at CSUN. I believe some of the tenured composition faculty members also saw the potential because I was earning a Ph.D. and because I effectively fulfilled my duties in serving on committees and taking on leadership roles. Plus, two of the tenured faculty members in the program at the time had been hired as tenure-track faculty from adjunct positions. I felt like I had a chance of securing a tenure-track position in composition there if one ever came up.

I was about a year out from finishing my doctorate when a full-time lecture-ship position was advertised at UCSB. I applied and was hired for the 2013-2014 academic year. Much like Jennifer, I saw this as a stepping-stone for my dream job as a tenure-track faculty member. One step it achieved on the path to a tenure-track job was that it was a full-time position. Another was that I would be able to take on more responsibilities, such as more committee work and teaching a variety of writing classes. In other words, I would gain valuable experience that would make me a more eligible candidate if a tenure-track position opened up at CSUN. When I talked to my colleagues at CSUN about leaving, I said, "Sometimes you have to leave to come back." But it didn't work out that way. I left for UCSB but then never went back.

A tenure-track position at CSUN was advertised the fall that I began teaching at UCSB. I applied for the position and was invited to interview in January 2014, but I didn't make it past the interview stage. I was so disappointed for all kinds of reasons, but mainly because it was the end of a dream I had really started believing in. For a long time after that, everything just felt wrong. At the same time, though, I was grateful to have the UCSB position. But still at this point, I considered it a "fallback" position and not necessarily a dream job. I figured I could stay and teach there and regroup to figure out what I wanted to do next.

Eventually, I came to feel relieved about not having gotten the tenure-track position at CSUN, as I began to see more clearly what I wanted out of my career, which turned out to be a teaching-focused position with less pressure to publish. But coming to terms with not getting the job at CSUN and starting to see the position at UCSB as more than a stepping-stone was a process—a process that lasted a year or more.

At this point, Jennifer and my stories come back together, and now here we are, solidly into our careers as continuing lecturers in the UCSB writing program. We have been teaching in this program for 25 collective years, and we both have embraced these positions as our “dream jobs.” In the next section, we want to take a moment to highlight the benefits and opportunities that these positions afford, thereby answering the question that Schell poses in her contribution to *Moving a Mountain: Transforming the Role of Contingent Faculty in Composition Studies and Higher Education*: “What are the benefits incurred in programs that employ a steady, professionally active group of part-time or full-time non-tenure track faculty?” (327).

## Not Looking Back—Embracing a Rich Academic Life off the Tenure Track

At first, both of us felt ambivalent about our positions in the UCSB writing program. However, after our first years in these positions, we realized they were fulfilling roles, rich with opportunities to teach new classes, to collaborate with colleagues on a variety of engaging research projects, and to engage in interesting and worthwhile service activities. As that job ad so many years ago suggested, we fell in love with the campus and students and are now committed to staying forever.

“But,” those of you who see tenure as the end-goal of the academic career hunt may be thinking, “how can you be satisfied with being just a lecturer?” Well, as Schell concludes,

. . . many colleges and universities have successfully created non-tenure-track positions with salaries, benefits, and renewable or multiyear contracts. These institutions have come to realize that the quality of instruction across the institution is affected by the ways in which writing faculty are hired, contracted, paid, oriented (or not), mentored (or not), evaluated (or not), and/or offered professional development opportunities (or not). (“What’s the Bottom Line” 333-34)

Much to our own surprise, we have indeed found this to be the case. For one thing, because we see ourselves as teachers first, we are very comfortable in these teaching-focused roles. Our teaching load is three courses per quarter for three quarters, but we get service credit for two courses, so we teach seven courses a year rather than nine. We are encouraged to choose from courses including developmental composition; first-year composition; and a slew of required upper-division, advanced writing courses focusing on writing for academic, professional, and civic contexts.<sup>3</sup> We also both work with graduate student TAs to

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3. Our program has a writing minor offering six different tracks: professional editing,

whom we offer mentorship as they teach first-year writing.

As for professional development, we are encouraged to engage with the profession in whatever ways we find fulfilling. Our colleagues come from a variety of academic and professional backgrounds and continue to practice their writing crafts in a variety of genres, including business, journalism, creative nonfiction, and poetry. The two of us regularly collaborate on scholarly projects by presenting at national and regional conferences, conducting research projects, and writing articles and book chapters. We are supported in this work through travel and research funding and are also rewarded for it in the continuing lecturer merit review system that we participate in every three years. In addition, we are often invited by our colleagues to participate in various scholarly activities, and there is abundant mentoring available to us.

In terms of service, because our unit is self-governing, we are expected to sit on multiple departmental committees associated with curriculum and program initiatives. As continuing lecturers, we are permanent members of the personnel committee, and we have both served on the hiring committee, experiences that have provided us with a voice in the hiring and retention of our colleagues.

Finally, our benefits are generous, and our salaries are reasonable. We receive yearly cost of living increases, and merit increases result from a review process in which our colleagues evaluate our teaching, service, and scholarly activities. We evaluate theirs as well. All in all, it's a pretty great gig.

## Disrupting the Vortex of Tenure as Ultimate Goal

In addition to highlighting what's good about these positions, we also want to focus on the powerful struggle we experienced in coming to terms with accepting a career trajectory that was different than what we had initially imagined for ourselves and that went against the grain of what is expected of newly minted (or close-to-being minted) Ph.D.s. Both of us having to undergo this process exposes some deeper issues at work. Indeed, both of our stories highlight a kind of myopic focus on the tenure track—specifically a focus on tenure-track positions in four-year universities.

One of the theories that has helped us think about this issue is Francois Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih's theory of minor transnationalism. In their theory, they use the metaphors of vertical and horizontal frameworks to discuss relationships between dominant and minority cultures, but we have found that their metaphors work well in discussing relationships between any dominant or minority group, such as those we find in the academy, like tenure-track and non-tenure-track faculty.

Lionnet and Shih describe a dominant culture as functioning like a vortex: At

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writing and civic engagement, multimedia communication, business communication, science communication, and journalism.

the center of the vortex, we find a value or “norm” from the dominant culture; this vortex then sucks in other cultures’ values and norms and measures them against the value or norm at the center, with other cultures ranked based on how well their values and norms measure up to those of the dominant group, creating a vertical, hierarchical structure (5). Furthermore, the constant direction and redirection of attention to the dominant values and norms creates a narrow frame that obscures other meaningful interactions that could be occurring beyond the scope of the dominant (1).

Lionnet and Shih describe how their theory of minor transnationalism emerged from insights they had about their respective subdiscipline-discipline relationships. They note that they both had careers in ethnic studies, but Lionnet’s home discipline was French and Shih’s home discipline was Chinese. They tell of meeting by chance at an international conference in Paris and explain that as they talked about their careers at the conference and then later at a cafe, they realized that their subdiscipline-discipline relationships were framed vertically. That is, by focusing all their attention on the disciplines of French or Chinese, they did not look to other ethnic studies programs for support or interaction. They did not look to other ethnic studies programs to see what they were doing. But for this chance encounter, they otherwise would be too caught up in the construct of relating to their disciplines vertically to have interacted across them (1).

While this limitation was a consequence of university systems, it was also a consequence of a habit of mind. Lionnet and Shih learned to see relationships vertically. They explain, “. . . our battles are always framed vertically, and we forget to look sideways to lateral networks that are not readily apparent” (1). Minor groups learn to see themselves in relation to dominant groups as opposed to being in relation to other minor groups or even just themselves, so focusing attention on the dominant group becomes naturalized.

In a way, the two of us see ourselves undergoing a similar process as Lionnet and Shih: We have realized that we were measuring our positions in the writing program against values that place tenure-track positions at the center and against which all other positions are measured. We were so focused on tenure-track positions, we missed seeing the richness the full-time UCSB continuing lectureship had to offer and missed seeing it as a career goal as opposed to a stepping-stone.

Lionnet and Shih also teach us to “look sideways to lateral networks” (1) because in doing so, we can look for the bigger picture. It is this process of reframing that helped the two of us come to value our positions in the UCSB writing program and embrace the continuing lecturer position as a career goal, just as others embrace tenure-track positions as career goals. Academia is a richer and more nuanced place than we often give it credit for, a view Mark McBeth and Tim McCormack encourage us to take:

As Steve Street suggests in *Academe*, we need to move past this full-time/part-time divide to understand that we already have



a professoriate that has a multiplicity of tiers: adjunct faculty (recently hired one course), adjunct faculty (long time/more than one course), graduate teaching fellows, faculty emeritus who still teach, tenure-track faculty, tenured faculty, emeritus faculty who do not teach, faculty chairs, lecturers, instructors, and teaching assistants. All faculty positions would benefit from the explicitly defined and carefully guarded job descriptions we have delineated for our lecturer lines. (54)

## And Yet . . .

We also want to point out that as much as our positions have going for them, they did not appear out of thin air. The story of how UCSB's writing program came to have the lecture lines the two of us occupy is clearly laid out in Nicholas Tingle and Judy Kirscht's "A Place to Stand: The Role of Unions in the Development of Writing Programs." Tingle and Kirscht explain that after years of negotiation, in 1986 the UC-AFT union finally succeeded in securing continuing lecturer status for those faculty who passed a sixth-year excellence review. They note that prior to this achievement, the university had a policy that dictated lecturers could only be given eight successive year-long contracts, after which they were automatically prevented from being rehired, a practice that was reduced in 1983 to a "four years and you are out" policy (221-22).

Due to the ongoing diligence of both the union and supportive administration and departmental leadership, the affordances for UCSB writing program continuing lecturers have improved from there. However, we also want to point out that advancements in working conditions have depended on careful strategy and deliberate action. As past program directors Madeleine Sorapure and Linda Adler-Kassner explain in "Context, Strategy, Identity: A History of Change in the UC Santa Barbara Writing Program," "To survive and thrive, independent writing programs must remain responsive to and proactive within ever shifting contexts" (110).

Sorapure and Adler-Kassner's piece exemplifies five strategies masterfully designed to respond to five distinct eras in the UCSB writing program's history. Similarly, in an interview conducted by Sorapure, Susan McLeod recalls some of the ways in which she strove to support continuing lecturers' professionalization and improve their working conditions by increasing salaries and improving hiring and retention practices when she directed the writing program from 2001-2006.

Tingle and Kirscht also point out that the UCSB writing program is a unique place, even within the UC system, and that "this success is not accidental" (230). They highlight four key events necessary to the program's success and survival:

- (1) collective action (the union won three-year contracts that provided a permanent faculty);
- (2) separation from the English department, where its interests could never be primary;
- (3) de-

velopment of a cross-disciplinary curriculum, including linked classes that took program faculty out of their isolated ghettos and built relationships across campus; (4) membership on university-wide committees, giving program faculty increased visibility and therefore gradual acceptance as an integral part of the university community. (230)

As we have been outlining and as Tingle and Kirscht corroborate, our positions were hard won through strategic planning, union activism, and contextual forces, but the hard work did not and does not stop there. The advancements that were achieved need to be maintained and allowed to evolve, and the union and ethical administrators—which include committed program directors and attuned deans, chancellors, etc.—play key roles in this work.

For instance, as we have been writing this chapter, our union and the university have been engaged in protracted, contentious negotiations. Our current contract expired almost two years ago, and despite a succession of 55 bargaining meetings, the university and our union's bargaining team have found it challenging to come to an agreement. This week, in fact, a two-day strike was called and subsequently canceled just hours before it was to take place when the two sides finally came to a tentative agreement. At the time of this writing, it had not yet been ratified, but if it is, this agreement will result in the strongest improvements to the UC continuing lecturer contract in 20 years, as it will increase security for continuing lecturers in their first six years of employment, raise compensation for all continuing lecturers, and provide all continuing lecturers with paid time off for family care and child bonding. It has been hailed by the union president as "the best contract in UC-AFT history and among the best nationwide for contingent faculty" (Shalby and Watanabe). This achievement is both something to celebrate and a clear reminder that "helpless acceptance of an underclass role is suicidal; we must maintain the attitude that created the union and sustained it through its infancy" (Tingle and Kirscht 230).

## In the End . . .

While we are aware that positions like ours are not a panacea to the many labor issues facing both contingent and tenured faculty in higher education, we believe these positions are far more worthy of consideration than dominant narratives suggest—dominant narratives we had uncritically accepted. As McBeth and McCormack have noted about their program, which provides many of the same benefits and affordances as ours does, "Our lecturer lines are not perfect by any means, but in terms of incrementally 'fairer and fairer' employment practice, we now have a point of departure upon which to improve" (54).

We sincerely hope that our chapter has served to challenge entrenched narratives about the stigma surrounding non-tenure-track faculty positions and to

reframe the conversation surrounding these positions. We urge others to consider looking sideways and beyond the tenure-track, particularly in a time when tenure-track positions are becoming less available and non-tenure-track positions are becoming more common. We hope that our stories can help others know what's possible, which, in turn, can empower people to make more deliberate decisions and embrace opportunities like these more readily than we did. We'd like to prevent others from experiencing the cognitive dissonance that we underwent as we came to terms with our roles, and ultimately we hope to help others avoid missing out on fulfilling academic careers, just because they are off the tenure track.

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