

A Kinder, Gentler Academy is Needed— But We Must Fight for It

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This academic year, I am finishing my twelfth year at SUNY Canton, a four-year college of technology in rural Northern New York. I am a Co-Chief Diversity Officer and an Associate Professor. My name is on three books, with two more forthcoming. My spouse and I both have full-time work and stable housing. I have attained, in some ways, more success than I ever imagined.

Looking back at the road I took to get here, however, reminds me that there were so many moments when I might never have made it this far.

I finished my PhD in 2010. The bottom had fallen out of the job market in 2008, in what now looks like a harbinger of the current academic job market devastation. All of the graduate students I talked to at MLA in 2009 were furious, and fearful, for it felt as though no one with any power was doing anything to try and stop the loss of livelihood that we were all facing. I was on the job market for three years, between 2009 and 2012, had two campus visits and two offers in that time, and took the second one. For long stretches of those three years, I was convinced I would never get to work in the profession I had spent eight years and three degrees training for. I spent my last two years on the market as a part-time professional tutor at a community college, but when I applied to open lecturer and faculty positions at the same school, I was never granted an interview.

To say I was elated to get the job at Canton is an understatement of massive proportions. I was crying with relief and happiness when I called my spouse to tell them. The job being in New York was an incredible blessing, since at that time it meant that our marriage (performed in Massachusetts in 2005) would be recognized in our new home, and we could share health insurance coverage. The people who had interviewed me, my new colleagues, had been incredibly kind and seemed to have a collegial department. Still, there were downsides. My starting salary was \$49,000 a year, which was a terrible salary even by 2012 standards. For those who will say I should have negotiated, I tried—and I was told flatly that there was no room for negotiation and no moving budget with the offer.¹

As a newly appointed Assistant Professor, teaching three sections of freshman composition and a literature class, I was routinely working 60-90 hours a week trying to keep up with all of the obligations of the job. Teaching so much composition meant spending a huge number of hours grading. Seventy-five writing students, at a minimum of 20 to 30 minutes per paper draft, meant 25 to 37 hours of just grading, almost weekly. *Only* grading. Outside of the class time, the prep time, the committee meetings, and the chapter and article writing. And that didn't include the literature class, which added another stack of papers to grade every few weeks.

The stress of it nearly destroyed my health. I didn't recognize until long afterward that I was terribly depressed. I had moved to my new job without my spouse, who still had work to finish in our previous location. I was by myself in an apartment full of boxes, sleeping four or five hours a night, doing nothing but working. I did not have my spouse or any of my family nearby; I had no support network.

It took me until January of my first academic year to find a therapist. Once I worked up the courage to go to our Employee Assistance Program and ask about local counselors, the person on duty that day (through no fault of her own) could not give me an answer about who might be available and taking patients. I had been terrified to ask, afraid that my department chair and those above her would hear about it, that they would question my fitness for the job if they knew I was looking for therapy. In the end, finding enough bravery to ask for help did not get me an answer; I had to start searching the internet and cold calling to find someone to talk to. Once I did find my therapist (and I remain deeply grateful for her), I could start working to get my stress levels under control, my sleep schedule back to something normal, and my professional and personal confidence put back together.

My spouse joining me that same January helped, too; we managed to unpack the apartment together and start trying to build a life in a new place. But the work did not stop. I published my first book in 2013. I ran major campus events, resurrected a yearly regional conference with our three neighboring universities, and advised 25 to 40 students a year (which was nothing compared to my colleagues in some other programs who had up to 100 advisees apiece). For the first three years on the tenure track, I also taught winter and summer classes in addition to the normal fall and spring terms—we were in desperate need of the money, as both of us were paying back student loans, and we were also trying to pay back the debt we had incurred with moving. It was made all the harder because my spouse initially did not have full-time work when they relocated.

My purpose in writing all of this, dear reader, is not to invite pity. My point is that I was in what is considered the *best* situation. I was in a tenure-track job. I had a salary. I had health care. I had seven years to prove myself. I wasn't making \$3,000 per class, nor was I facing the prospect of moving again in a year or two. I had welcoming and supportive colleagues who willingly shared their teaching strategies and resources with me. If everything I went through in those first few years was considered the best scenario, and it still was almost more than I could bear, imagine what life is like for the many, many others who are in more precarious positions. Those who are adjuncts for years on end, or those who take two or three or four postdocs or visiting assistant professor jobs, moving every two or three years and having no chance to acclimate, make friends, or put down roots, much less achieve any sort of economic stability. If jobs that pay unlivable salaries and require impossible hours of work to meet all requirements for advancement are the *best-case* scenario, and absolute poverty, no health care, and impossible hours are the worst-case scenario, it is hard to see what our profession is offering that would entice people to stay.

The American Association of University Professors recently reported that almost 70% of faculty are now contingent, including all university faculty who are full-time non-tenure-track, full-time with no tenure system, and part-time faculty.² This means that a mere 30% of university faculty (myself included) are in tenured or tenure-track lines, with the academic freedom protections, access to research resources, and permanent status that tenure provides. Unsurprisingly, women and underrepresented minorities occupy a greater number of contingent positions across all types of higher education institutions. Even more alarmingly, the number of graduate student employees has increased over twice as much as the number of full- and part-time faculty. While faculty positions have increased by 19 percent from 2002 to 2021, the number of graduate student positions has increased by 44 percent in the same period.³

While the rise of contingency in the academy, and its accompanying economic and professional insecurity, has been covered extensively, less notice has been taken of what this means for faculty workloads. Many contingent faculty teach four, five, or even six classes a semester.⁴ A fair number of tenured and tenure-track faculty do as well, including many at my own university. Teaching so many classes, as well as the prep and grading that goes with each, makes it infinitely harder to find time for service on committees, research and writing, and service to the profession like peer reviewing and book reviewing. These activities are *required* as part of tenure and promotion for those folks on the tenure track. Often, contingent folks are, at the very least, required to perform advising in

addition to their teaching load. Despite the time demands and stress of trying to fit such activities around an already-exhausting teaching load, universities are by and large unwilling to engage with faculty pleas for a more reasonable and balanced workload. Having a majority of faculty who are contingent allows institutions to cut costs. Usually, that seems to be the only bottom line that matters to those in the highest positions.

What remains invisible, however, is both what is lost to the university when faculty are struggling with such an impossible workload, and the cruelty that is being enacted in the process. Faculty are not superhuman, yet they attempt to meet impossible expectations to retain their positions. In addition, the many challenges of the job are not the only difficulties faculty contend with. Faculty have disabilities and chronic health conditions.⁵ Faculty struggle with mental health and addiction.⁶ Faculty who are parents struggle to find childcare and balance their children's schedules with their own.⁷ Institutional accommodations could be provided to help faculty with these needs, but often they are not, or are only provided after significant resistance by the university. Asking for accommodations can often be impeded by the fear of professional retaliation. We should not, as faculty, be begging for something that is required by law. Nor should we be forced into choosing between our professional obligations and our families. Accommodations of the same sort we are required to provide to our students are also a crucial part of faculty wellness and success.

There is a reason that teaching two classes a term on a tenure-track line used to be the norm for faculty: it is the only way to have enough time for all the required duties of the job and still retain some time for the rest of one's life outside of work. Teaching two classes means that when class is over, a person can prep for the next set of classes, grade assignments, serve on committees, advise students, do research, and write scholarly work. Our jobs as professors have many requirements. Performing them all successfully requires adequate amounts of time and resources. Without those, to put it bluntly, we are being set up to fail. We cannot be our best and most supportive selves for our students when our own situations are so untenable, nor can we succeed at all the facets of our jobs when there are not enough hours in the day. Financial instability and housing insecurity only increase the immense strain that faculty are already laboring under.

Turning the academy into a kinder and less exploitive place sometimes seems impossible, especially for those of us who have been in this profession for decades, and who have seen our institutions go from lean to starved. We have watched professor positions, which used to be pathways to the middle and upper-middle class, become paths to burnout, poverty, and exploitation. Despair is easy to succumb to—but those among us who

have the least are showing the way with their efforts to unionize and fight back. In 2023, graduate students and postdocs formed a total of 26 new unions for 48,000 employees. Undergraduates also formed 11 new unions for about 2,000 employees.⁸ The pace of unionization shows no sign of slowing down, either—already in 2024, 2,000 graduate student and postdocs at the California Institute of Technology have voted to unionize.⁹ The Washington State University Coalition of Academic Employees (WSU-CASE) have won their first contract, covering about 1,800 student employees.¹⁰ In a promising development for more established faculty, 650 tenured and tenure-track faculty members at Illinois State University have also voted to unionize.¹¹ Contract Faculty United (CFU-UAW), the union for contingent and lecturer faculty at NYU, just won their union vote 553-72.¹² In the face of massive budget cuts on already underfunded campuses, City University of New York faculty, staff, and graduate students are mobilizing.¹³ In their latest round of negotiations in 2023, United University Professions, my own union, won the best contract we've had since I became a SUNY employee.

Other strategies might also bear fruit. Universities could perform salary surveys and address salary compression among their faculty and staff. Boards of trustees could authorize salaries that actually keep up with the cost of living. State legislatures could ensure adequate and equal funding for all public campuses, funding that would allow for good salaries and a budget for needed faculty accommodations. Subsidized childcare on campus, that costs less for university employees, would lessen stress for parents. All of these steps, however, require raising awareness, organizing, negotiating, interfacing with and petitioning legislators, and being willing to put ourselves forward and demand change. Livable salaries, needed accommodations, generous healthcare, and reasonable workloads are possible, if we are willing to fight for them. We owe it to ourselves, our students, and those who come after us to make the academy a kinder and more sustainable place of learning, one where we can all not just survive, but thrive and become our best selves.

¹ It's important to note that SUNY salaries across campuses are wildly uneven. Our four types of campuses—university centers, comprehensive colleges, technology colleges, and community colleges—all have different levels of funding that are based on a state formula. Whether the salary I was offered was typical for a SUNY humanities professor at that time, I can't say—but I knew even then that it was not enough to live on.

² Glenn Colby, "Data Snapshot: Tenure and Contingency in US Higher Education," American Association of University Professors, March 2023, online

at <https://www.aaup.org/article/data-snapshot-tenure-and-contingency-us-higher-education>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ See, for example, Jon Marcus, “Some universities’ response to budget woes: Make faculty teach more courses,” *The Washington Post*, April 30, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/college-faculty-course-workload-budgets/2021/04/30/d5d2ee1e-a904-11eb-8c1a-56f0cb4ff3b5_story.html.

⁵ Joseph Grigely, “The Neglected Demographic: Faculty Members With Disabilities,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 27, 2017, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-neglected-demographic-faculty-members-with-disabilities/>. Although extensive reporting is hard to find, a few articles also indicated that faculty with disabilities struggled to secure remote online teaching as an accommodation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

⁶ Two sources that are particularly helpful and link to numerous other studies are as follows:

Ivy Bourgeault, Janet Mantler, and Nicole Power, “Mental health in academia: The challenges faculty face predate the pandemic and require systemic solutions,” *Academic Matters: OCUFA’s Journal of Higher Education*, Fall 2021, <https://academicmatters.ca/mental-health-in-academia-the-challenges-faculty-face-predicate-the-pandemic-and-require-systemic-solutions/>.

Dalal Hammoudi Halat, et al., “Understanding and Fostering Mental Health and Well-Being among University Faculty: A Narrative Review,” *Journal of Clinical Medicine* 12, no.13 (June 2023): 4425, <https://doi:10.3390/jcm12134425>.

It should also be noted that it is often the conditions of an academic job that lead to addiction and substance abuse. See Alicia Andrzejewski, “I’m Struggling to Get Sober, and Working in Academia Only Makes it Harder,” *HuffPost*, November 30, 2023, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/alcohol-addiction-sobriety-in-academia_n_6564e392e4b0827ae61579d0#:~:text=It%20swallows%20the%20qualities%20we,us%20to%20be%20fully%20present.

See also Emma Pettit, “‘A Minefield’: How Scholars Who Don’t Drink Navigate the Conference Social Scene,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 9 Jan. 2019, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/a-minefield-how-scholars-who-dont-drink-navigate-the-conference-social-scene/>.

⁷ See, for example, Katie Bootsma and Julia Staley, “Professors Struggle With Dependent Care, Lack of University Support Amid COVID-19,” *The Hoya*, February 19, 2021, <https://thehoya.com/23104793/features/professors-struggle-with-dependent-care-lack-of-university-support-amid-covid-19/>.

Kiernan Mathews, “Childcare for Faculty: The Babar in the Room,” *Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education*, Harvard University, August 10, 2020, <https://coache.gse.harvard.edu/blog/childcare-faculty-babar-room>.

Josh Moody, “The Campus Child Care Crisis,” *Inside Higher Ed*, August 7, 2022, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/08/08/end-campus-child-care-leaves-parents-scrambling>.

⁸ National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education and the Professions Newsletter, “2023 Year in Review: New Higher Education Collective Bargaining Units and Pending Representation Cases,” January 2024, Hunter College CUNY, <https://myemail.constantcontact.com/January-2024-Newsletter--News--Analysis--and-Updates.html?soid=1102372137664&aid=jMiXDmyw1L8>.

Ryan Quinn, “New Unions Represent Over 40K Grad Students, Postdocs, Researchers,” *Inside Higher Ed*, January 29, 2024, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/quick-takes/2024/01/29/new-unions-over-40k-grad-students-postdocs-researchers>.

⁹ “Graduate Researchers and Postdocs at Caltech Vote Yes on Forming Union,” *PasadenaNow*, February 9, 2024, <https://www.pasadenanow.com/main/graduate-researchers-and-postdocs-at-caltech-vote-yes-on-forming-union>.

Ryan Quinn, “Caltech Grad Students, Postdocs Vote to Unionize,” *Inside Higher Ed*, February 9, 2024, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/quick-takes/2024/02/09/caltech-grad-students-postdocs-vote-unionize>.

¹⁰ Mallory Gruben, “WSU grad students win agreement just hours into strike,” *Northwest Labor Press*, January 17, 2024, <https://nwlaborpress.org/2024/01/wsugrad-students-strike/>.

Ryan Quinn, “Washington State U Student Workers Strike, Get Deal,” *Inside Higher Ed*, January 18, 2024, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/quick-takes/2024/01/18/washington-state-u-student-workers-strike-get-deal>.

¹¹ Ryan Quinn, “Illinois State U Tenured, Tenure-Track Faculty Members Unionize,” *Inside Higher Ed*, January 11, 2024, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/quick-takes/2024/01/11/illinois-state-u-tenured-tenure-track-faculty-unionizes>.

¹² See the union’s announcement at <https://twitter.com/CfuUaw/status/1763012506438512888>. Their website can be found at <https://nyucontractfacultyunion.org>.

¹³ Olivia Wood, “CUNY Workers Launch New Strike Campaign,” *LeftVoice*, February 12, 2024, <https://www.leftvoice.org/cuny-workers-launch-new-strike-campaign/>.