

**Reclaiming the Landscape:
35 things you can do to improve work conditions of contingent faculty**

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Author's note: This paper was my contribution to the 2016 Presidential Panel for the Society for Classical Studies (SCS), convened by John Marincola, and is presented here more or less as delivered on 7 January 2016. Permission is granted to share and distribute this paper freely in its entirety; for excerpts, discussion, or improvements, please write toph.marshall@ubc.ca.

It's a great honour to have been invited to speak on this panel addressing the needs of contingent faculty. The invitation came, I suspect, in my capacity as chair of the SCS Placement Committee, but from 1993-1998 I held six short-term appointments at five Canadian universities, ranging from three to ten months. In pursuit of a tenure-track job I moved five times, each time across a provincial border. Despite my best efforts, in part as a Canadian with a UK degree, I was never competitive in the US market as a junior scholar. That said, I am under no illusions: the job market is much tougher now than it was for me, and I genuinely believe that most people with tenured jobs do not realize the degree to which the landscape has altered. Now, I am speaking only of positions within academia (which is all I know) and I speak from the Canadian experience, where virtually all universities are public, working conditions for adjunct faculty tend not to be so desperate, and where there are often better protections in place from unions and faculty associations; but I hope what I say can be of some use.

My goal is to outline as many specifics as I can about what we as individual faculty members with jobs can do to improve things. Whatever the nature of the landscape for adjunct faculty, we as academics need to transform it before, as my title imagines, we can reclaim it. At the same time, it's important to acknowledge that there are competing pressures. Even with goodwill and the intention to help the situation of contingent faculty, individual tenure-track faculty may often at the same time be preparing students for entering the job market (and these people also need support, and pre-professional training, and letters); and untenured faculty, typically those closest to being hired with direct experience of the current job market, are facing pressures to achieve tenure. In addition to pressures, though, I feel there is an unwillingness to discover the realities contingent faculty face.

At the same time, individual faculty members can have remarkably little voice outside of their immediate departments. University and government policies are often inimical to the wellbeing of anyone in an outside-group, and that inevitably includes the under-employed. Every culture is different, and it's not going to be the case that one-solution-fits-all.

What then can any of us do? Given that even those with permanent jobs feel powerless, many of the actions I propose are small but real changes we can make in our behaviours. Because behaviours are what are important, and talking about things is crucial. Caring a lot but not talking about changing things does nothing: as one scholar I spoke with emphasized, drawing on a mantra from her daughter's playschool, "Use your words." In preparation for today I spoke to individuals at several universities who are contingent faculty – every one unique and with a different story – and I discovered a lot of real things that we all can do (what I can do) to ameliorate their situations. All of these reflect real failures of particular departments in the past handful of years. But the truth is, there is a need for a fundamental change of perspective from those who are lucky enough to have a tenure track job. My goal here is not to shift the responsibility for action onto the overworked, scrambling contingent faculty themselves. We don't want to ask for unpaid labour, but we do need to provide opportunities.

PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES.

1. And so asking "Would you like to **present in the department seminar series?**" can't be seen as an obligation, but should be made available to individuals who might not have many (or any) invited lectures yet. The individual must know that it's not an obligation; but it is paternalistic to decide in advance that a job seeker would not want such an opportunity; he or she needs to feel safe enough to say no, and recognize that it's an offer and not a demand. Words matter: the offer indicates that they are seen as scholars able to make an intellectual contribution to the department, not just as cheap expendable labour (it goes without saying that such talks must be promoted in the same way that they would be for visiting scholars).
2. The same is true of **guest lectures/covering missed classes**. These are optional experiences, but may allow contingent faculty to gain some experience teaching in a wider range of classes than they otherwise would. Since contingent faculty often teach lower-level classes, an invited lecture might be the only opportunity they have to teach in their area of research.
3. The reverse of this is also helpful: **offer to cover classes** for a few days if it will help a contingent faculty member attend a conference, or accept an invitation to speak elsewhere.
4. Are **non-burdensome service opportunities** available? Some will not want them, but for others the opportunity to contribute in a direct way to the department life outside of the classroom will be welcome, and will give them a line on their cv they might not otherwise have. This can't be forced: but if it is something that you genuinely believe that you would value in a job applicant, making it available to contingent faculty with the option to decline is supportive.

COURTESY

There are a number of issues that seem to me to be simple courtesy:

5. When contingent faculty are hired, send an **email of introduction** to all members of the department letting them know that new people will be working in the department, teaching these courses, and where their offices are – this should present them as scholarly colleagues, people who have value because of their research, and providing an opportunity to begin a conversation.
6. It follows from that that contingent faculty need an office, a place where they can store books, work comfortably, and meet with students.
7. When contingent faculty are hired, show where **access to stationery**, white board markers, and other small but necessary items are that are made available to tenure-track faculty are kept.
8. Let them know that they may use **departmental letterhead** on job applications.
9. Ensure that they have **email privileges** that last at least until the beginning of the next academic year (this is particularly important if someone has just been hired for the first semester).
10. Ensure that they are added to the **website**, at the beginning of the academic year, with lists of publications and courses being taught, and their current email address; and that again this would be in place until the beginning of the new academic year (and certainly throughout the job-hunting season).
11. Ensure they are included on **departmental mailing lists**, so that they hear about lectures and events that are taking place.

HIRING

There are a number of issues around the issue of hiring. Many of the people with whom I spoke spend much of their time working semester-by-semester or month-by-month. They do not expect to be re-hired necessarily where they are, and they do not know the insides of the processes that are at work.

12. **Acknowledge applications** for single-course positions as you would for an ongoing position, to people already working in the department and those looking for work.
13. **Hire as early as you can**, and provide a timeline so that applicants know when they are no longer being considered;
14. **Limit the amount of work expected of applicants before their first paycheck**. In one circumstance described to me, individuals had to design each course (with a detailed syllabus) for which they wished to be considered, and submit it to the department as part of their application. This heavily frontloads work, and leads to a lot of squandered time.

15. **Ensure all available courses are advertised**, that there's no ad hocery. If courses suddenly become available at the start of term, let those who have applied for courses previously know about it, and consider them first.
16. Someone who has been teaching a course for several years might be very happy to teach something else if (for whatever reason) that course is no longer available to them. A faculty union might allow individuals who have taught a course right of first refusal, but no seniority for another course. We can be better than that minimum standard, and **consider existing contingent faculty for all available courses**.
17. One instinct, which I've seen at several universities, is to bring in many individuals to teach courses only in their specialist areas. This is insidious for many reasons: first, it means that someone with a small but regular income could suddenly lose that income stream to someone with less experience; second, that no one has a full course load. I pressed my sources on this point, and there was a general agreement: it is better to consolidate courses in this way (and to let people know this is happening early) because it frees them up to look for work at other institutions. Leading them on with breadcrumbs (and forcing them into such a relationship at two or three institutions simultaneously) is not healthy. Where possible, **combine courses into fuller packages**.
18. In that sense, **consistency is more important than volume**. The summer is when many contingent faculty are particularly vulnerable.
19. One of the saddest things I heard was that "sessional faculty are made to be eliminate-able." One reason they exist is so that low-enrollment classes may be shed more easily. If a course gets cancelled (which might be as late as August for a course starting September), contingent faculty may suddenly find themselves without an income stream that they needed to feed themselves. That is not the case for tenure-track faculty whose courses under-enroll: they do receive their salaries, and either teach an overload the following semester, or do extra service. Further, at that point it is too late for the contingent individual to apply elsewhere. **Apportioning of courses has to recognize the financial realities of contingent faculty**.
20. Sometimes courses come with an implicit threat – "you'll need twenty students or the course gets cancelled" – without the means to provide even the most basic information that might attract students (such as a web presence for the instructor among other department faculty). **Avoid tone-deaf comments** of this sort.
21. We must assume **contingent faculty want to be part of the research culture of the department**: as one person said to me, "marginalization is what grinds."

RESEARCH AND TRAVEL FUNDING

As I shift to research and travel funding, many of you will noticed that I begin to make a shift from those that cost almost nothing (in terms of time, money, and departmental resources) to some that do require resources. The first 21 suggestions were “free”: but there is much more that can be done.

22. **Let contingent faculty know of grant opportunities** for which they might be eligible (there may be money for curriculum development, for example).
23. If there is a pool of **travel money** available for students and/or faculty, make a portion of it available to contingent faculty.
24. If grants are only available to permanent faculty members, allow contingent faculty to be **co-applicants on grants** (without shifting the burden of the application process onto them!).
25. **Ask about their research**; consider co-publishing: I have started to ask, “What can I do to improve your research profile?”

EXPECT MORE

We can even pursue options that expect more.

26. Find a way to allow contingent faculty to **continue to have email access** after they are no longer employed
27. Find a way to allow them to **continue to have library (and JSTOR) access** after they are no longer employed.
28. Offer to sit in a class and **write a teaching evaluation for their dossier**. While it won't carry the same weight as a letter of reference, it is a way for them to strengthen their applications. Often contingent faculty are bypassed: as one scholar said, “Because there is no oversight, no one knows what's going on in classes, and so when it comes to hiring, we're a black box.”
29. Have a **guide written for new contingent faculty**, indicating who in the office does what, where forms are kept, how to get a library card, guidelines for photocopier use, how to order textbooks, how to ensure you get a paycheck, what to do to cancel a class, how access and diversity issues work for students, etc. In my department, this 12-page document was co-authored by two long-time sessionals, and it is regularly mentioned as the most useful thing new faculty (both contingent and ongoing) receive when they arrive.
30. **Invite contingent faculty to department meetings.** Consider whether those that teach the majority of your department's students should have some voting rights. This might represent a significant cultural shift.
31. **Provide opportunities for practice job talks**, and to receive feedback. This is something often offered to doctoral students, but it is not extended to contingent faculty.

32. Some contingent faculty might want more detailed **mentorship opportunities**. This can't be forced, but there is great value from an ongoing relationship that can help a junior scholar identify little things, from quick chats on how to structure a chapter to navigating the minefield of presses for monographs and edited volumes.
33. In particular, there can be need for **prioritization**: given that there can be so much conflicting guidance, having a faculty mentor help with how to balance teaching and research with an eye to employability is invaluable. Balancing time to maximize output is essential.
34. All of this requires strong leadership from the department head, who must remain sensitive to these things, and to senior faculty to remain watchful to ensure that fairness for all is maintained. **Vigilance** is crucial.
35. And so, finally (for now at least), there is a need to **support tenure-track faculty who advocate for contingent faculty**: that can be a service position within the department.

This is not a complete list. But if 35 suggestions can be presented in a fifteen-minute talk, it can point the way to having a conversation in your own department about specifics to your own situation that can improve things for your contingent faculty.

When I began to prepare this talk, I spoke to several individuals. Some were in my department, people that I think of as friends and colleagues. I had no idea how much I was going to learn. I've listed 35 points that seem to me to be reasonable and in most cases practicable; but I am not certain my own department would receive a passing grade. I'm ashamed at myself for not asking questions so directly before, and I'm grateful to those who spoke with me frankly about how finances and job hunting affect their cognitive load that they bear; how little regularity there was for them on a month-by-month basis; how different universities hire in different months and so job searching becomes a year-round process; and so much more. Money is part of the problem, but morale and respect are equally important.

Fundamentally, we need to change the narrative about why I have a job. It's not innate skill, and perseverance isn't enough for the cream to rise to the top. That's bullshit. Senior faculty have to create an environment in which people will say these things: we need to use our words. We can't presume we know the realities being faced, or guessing at how a particular group would respond to an offer that hasn't been made. All this is designed to making things better on the ground. But we also need to change the landscape. We need to resist watered-down positions (research lines being transformed into "teaching" lines).

Being contingent faculty affects mental and physical health, and family relationships. This must be an unacceptable consequence. There are moral questions we need to ask when we hire: what obligations (if any) we hold to our former students;

what obligations (if any) we have to interviewing those with permanent positions already, against those with just as much experience but without a permanent job. Such questions, in my experience, simply do not get asked.

I don't know if we can create a better job market: even if we did, there will always be new PhDs freshly minted who also deserve fair consideration for jobs. But improvement is only going to come if we ask these questions and make these opportunities, wherever we can – if we work actively to make our own institutions a healthier place to be contingent faculty. Improvements will come incrementally, and thoughtfulness is a necessary early step. As one researcher said to me, “There is clueless goodwill, and clue-ful goodwill.” We need to have a clue.

Sincere thanks are due to all the individuals who shared their experiences with me, to my fellow panelists, and to John Marincola.