

# Editorial

*I want to use this issue's editorial to introduce Professors Carolyn Betensky of the University of Rhode Island, Seth Kahn of West Chester University, and Talia Schaffer of Queens College CUNY. They are founding members of Tenure for the Common Good, an organization devoted to encouraging tenured faculty to use our relatively secure positions to make our workplaces fair for all. Their website can be found at <http://tenureforthecommongood.org/>. A relatively new organization, they are extremely interested in welcoming new members. Their essay, which follows, addresses matters about which I feel strongly. It addresses them, perhaps, more clearly than I have managed in my previous editorials. Please visit their website for more information and ideas. I thank them for giving me permission to share this.*

## A Snapshot of Structural Inequity

*By Carolyn Betensky, Seth Kahn, and Talia Schaffer, Tenure for the Common Good*

The AAUP just issued its latest analysis of the degradation of labor conditions at American universities and colleges. Across the academy, from R1 institutions through community colleges, the percentage of faculty who are either on the tenure track or are tenured has decreased to such an extent that (potential) job security, academic freedom, and—frequently—a living wage are perks available to only a minority of us. The expanded use (we say “use” advisedly) of non-tenure-track faculty is at its most egregious at institutions awarding associates degrees, but it is pervasive at the most prestigious research universities in the nation, as well. The average percentage of faculty who were part-time or full-time non-tenure-track instructors was no less than 73% in 2016. These faculty members—defined by different institutions as adjuncts, postdocs, TAs, non-tenure-track faculty, clinical faculty, part-timers, lecturers, instructors, or non-senate colleagues—constitute the overwhelming majority of the academic workforce. Certainly, some institutions are improving their treatment of full-time non-tenure-track faculty, and some faculty prefer to stay off the tenure track; however, neither of these addresses the structural issue: institutions can refuse to commit to their own faculty and refuse to provide minimally decent working conditions.

The consequences of this trend cannot be understated. For the institutions themselves, the differential treatment of the majority of their teaching workforce means a lack of cohesion and a growing sense of resentment among the majority of instructors. Faculty teaching under precarious conditions of employment are often excellent and beloved instructors, but if they must teach on multiple campuses or teach more courses than the tenure-stream minority, their ability to offer individualized attention and mentoring to students is constrained by their lack of time. The fact that they outnumber tenured and tenure-track faculty but are all too often still not considered “real” faculty means that the majority of instructors must endure additional and unquantifiable insults to their professionalism (and frankly, to their humanity).

American universities and colleges have gradually developed a two-tier system of employment that is both short-sighted and mean-spirited; the fact that it has been thirty years in the making doesn't mean it is less of either. We are hurting our institutions on many fronts: we are depriving our students of the fullest attentions of those who literally cannot afford to be present to them beyond the classroom, we are turning a blind eye to social injustice, and we are doing real harm to a great number of our colleagues. And, if you wonder who we is in this paragraph, it is anyone who has benefited from the precarity of another faculty member in the name of your professional advancement; anyone who has balanced the books for your department, college, or campus on the backs of faculty who could least afford to fight back; anyone who accepts the increasingly precarious labor conditions in our profession as given, or normal.

The trend toward a contingent instructional workforce has continued through both times of austerity and times of plenty. Decisions to allocate funds for buildings or climbing walls—or for more highly paid administrators—instead of for paying faculty a living wage and providing benefits are just that: they are decisions, and they cannot go unchallenged. Currently, most administrations defend the shift away from tenure as if it were inevitable, offering a shifting series of rationales we are all familiar with: austerity because of budget cuts; the need for “workforce flexibility”; responses to “market demands” (often left unarticulated); and so on. Such economic justifications must be challenged at every turn. Reducing operating costs and responding to managerial preferences (posing as imperatives), cannot justify exploiting your workforce and degrading your institution.

Adjunct and contingent faculty activists have been sounding the warning for years—not only that their conditions are unjust, but that the tenured—even the whole notion of tenure—are more precarious than we think. It is long past time for us to hear that warning and act in solidarity.

Therefore, the members of Tenure for the Common Good are calling on those of us with job security to demand better for all our colleagues. We need to hold our administrations responsible for their decisions to hire contingent and precarious colleagues. We need to make the point loud and clear that the benefits of increasing precarity are not distributed evenly among faculty, students, and administrations; neither are the harms. Not to put too fine a point on it: the people who benefit from the ongoing casualization of the faculty are few; the people who are harmed most directly—students and faculty (including those of us who are personally secure)—are many.

Tenure for the Common Good organizes tenure-track faculty to fight alongside our contingent and adjunct colleagues. We advocate for local actions at individual institutions, legal actions and unionization. We want to initiate campaigns to shame and put economic pressure on universities who rely on ill-treated contingent faculty. Universities may never go back to a tenure-track norm, but let us imagine the kind of academic future we want—a future where we are all treated with respect and given the basic conditions we all deserve—and work together to make that a reality. We invite our members to join us in the

battle to stop the current situation, and instead, to start imagining what kinds of work conditions, safeguards, and opportunities can keep American academia flourishing in the twenty-first century.