An Evolving Discourse: The Shifting Uses of Position Statements on the Contingent Faculty

Sue Doe and Mike Palmquist

OVER the past three decades, faculty members in English studies and the professional organizations to which they belong have attended with increasing urgency to the “plight” of their colleagues in contingent positions. Their attention to this issue has produced what has become a steady stream of scholarly and professional work on what has come to be known as contingency studies, ranging from official position statements from professional organizations (including the Modern Language Association, the Association of Departments of English, the National Council of Teachers of English, the Conference on College Composition and Communication, and the Council of Writing Program Administrators) to a growing collection of data on the status and working conditions of contingent faculty members to conferences, workshops, and special issues of scholarly journals.

Scholars working within contingency studies have traced the trajectory of contingent appointments in American higher education (Baldwin and Chronister; Gappa and Leslie; Schuster and Finkelstein; AAUP Contingent Faculty Index) and particularly within English studies (Enos; Schell; Horner; Bousquet, Scott, and Parascondola). They have debated its implications (Curtis and Jacob; Jaeger and Eagan; Nelson, Taylor, Kezar, Vedder, and Trower) and linked the issues of contingency to economic debates about the defunding of public education and to other fiscal and managerial factors (Rhoades; Newfield; Tuchman; “What Are”; Watson). Furthermore, they have explored lines of thought about what might be done to move forward in both practical and ethical directions (Kezar and Sam, “Beyond Contracts” and Understanding). Our professional organizations, in the meantime, have established commissions and committees, collected and considered data, and issued statements in an attempt to influence what has become an all-too-clear historical shift in employment patterns within the academy. Professional associations have also consolidated to provide more comprehensive sets of data and discussion (One Faculty).

In this essay, we offer an analysis of the extent to which our professional organizations have been able to shape national and local discourses about contingent positions within our discipline. We suggest that, despite the evident failure of early efforts to preserve the primacy of tenure-line positions, our professional organizations have nonetheless provided a substantial set of resources that have been (and can continue to be) used within local contexts to improve the status and working conditions of faculty members in contingent positions. Looking forward, it seems plausible that work on the local level, supported by these resources and shaped by an evolving discourse about contingency, might ultimately lead to a renewed and potentially more vigorous employment system in which tenure—in a variety of forms—is more widely enjoyed than is currently the case.
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Framing the National Debate

Professional organizations relating to English studies have published more than two dozen position statements, with the highest number coming from the Modern Language Association (MLA) and a steady stream of others from the College Conference on Composition and Communication (CCCC), the Association of Departments of English (ADE), the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA), the Association of Writing Programs (AWP), Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). Nevertheless, our professional organizations—as well as the majority of faculty members in tenure-line positions—have been surprisingly slow to grasp the implications of the growing reliance on faculty members who serve in contingent positions. The sense of purpose and outrage that brought forth the Wyoming Resolution (which emerged from the 1986 Wyoming Conference on English and was subsequently published in College English in March 1987 [Robertson, Crowley, and Lentricchia]) was all too quickly—but perhaps inevitably—replaced with a bunker mentality: the goal of our professional organizations would be, first and foremost, to preserve the tenure system.

In their discussion of the history of the Wyoming Resolution and its effects, James C. McDonald and Eileen E. Schell observe that reactions to the first organizational position statement following the Wyoming Resolution, the 1989 CCCC draft report (“Statement of Principles”), focused more on the qualifications of those teaching composition and less on the status and working conditions of these faculty members. Indeed, they note that “many part-time faculty members felt that the 1989 ‘Statement of Principles’ weakened attempts to improve their working conditions and could lead to the elimination of their jobs if implemented” (371). This outcome, they note, was a far cry from what had seemed possible in the days immediately following the Wyoming conference. Indeed, the emerging document seemed to erode not build the confidence of contingent faculty members since it implied an underlying inadequacy in them rather than in the institutions that employed them.

Over the next decade, from the early 1990s until the early 2000s, the primary stance taken by professional organizations would be to preserve tenure at all costs. While lip service was paid to the need to improve the conditions under which faculty members in contingent positions labored, early position statements issued by the CCCC, NCTE, and MLA advanced the argument—most often implicitly but on occasion in the baldest terms—that the quality of instruction produced by contingent faculty members would be inferior to that provided by faculty members in tenure-line positions. This view was clearly presented in the 1989 CCCC “Statement of Principles”:

[When institutions depend increasingly on faculty whose positions are tenuous and whose rights and privileges are unclear or nonexistent, those freedoms established as the right of full-time tenurable and tenured faculty are endangered. Moreover, the excessive reliance on marginalized faculty damages the quality of education. Even when, as is often the case, these faculty bring to their academic appointments the appropriate credentials and commitments to good teaching, their low salaries, poor working conditions, and uncertain futures mar their effectiveness and reduce the possibilities for loyalty to the institution’s educational goals. All lose: teachers,
students, schools, and ultimately a democratic society that cannot be without citi-
zens whose education empowers them to read and write with critical sophistication.
(emphasis added)

Subsequent statements echoed this sentiment. In two 1992 statements, the ADE argued strongly against the use of adjunct faculty members and in the process disparaged those holding non-tenure-line positions. The ADE statement on the use of adjunct faculty members opens by observing, “The expansion of the adjunct ranks in English departments over the past two decades threatens the integrity of the profession and instructional programs,” before calling attention to the poor working conditions and lack of professional respect associated with most contingent positions (“ADE Statement on the Use”). Similarly, in its statement on class size and work-load, the ADE urges, “Part-time and temporary teaching appointments should be avoided as a rule” (“ADE Guidelines”). The ADE and the English programs it represented seem to have found themselves in a compromised position: even as the ADE was officially distancing itself from what was being characterized as a subprofessional faculty, the programs it represented were relying ever more heavily on contingent faculty members for much of the production of instruction.

Throughout the 1990s, professional organizations continued to argue for the primacy of tenure-line positions, attempting in almost all cases to present them, either directly or by implication, as leading to a higher quality of teaching than contingent positions. It was clear, however, that these arguments were not having their intended effect. In 1997, for example, the MLA Committee on Professional Employment asserted that the “disturbingly heavy reliance on part-timers in American higher education today contributes directly and indirectly to the failures of our academic system” (“Committee”). The committee’s solution was unsurprising: “[E]xcellence in education for present and future students depends on an increase in full-time tenure-track faculty positions.” That same year, the NCTE membership adopted a resolution that called for the organization to “join other disciplinary and higher-education groups in encouraging legislative and policy bodies to adopt and fund initiatives that provide for labor equity in graduate employee and adjunct work” (“Resolution on Affirming Labor Equity”).

By the early 2000s, position statements and other documents issued by professional organizations were reflecting a growing awareness that a position of tenure at all costs was not advancing the conversation. As the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) would report later that decade, the number of tenure-line positions as an overall percentage of all teaching positions in higher education was declining rapidly, from 47 percent in 1989 to roughly 30 percent by the middle of the decade (AAUP Contingent Faculty Index). It was clear that faculty members in contingent positions were fast becoming, if they had not already become, the majority. Increasingly, these documents attended directly to labor conditions and, in some cases, to the relationships between faculty members in tenure-line and those in contingent positions. The MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Teaching signaled a shift in perspective, avoiding the by then customary cautions that an overreliance on contingent positions would lead to inferior learning outcomes while recommending that “institutions and departments provide professional recognition, appropriate contractual
arrangements, and appropriate compensation” for faculty members in part-time and non-tenure-line positions (MLA Ad Hoc Committee). The MLA’s 2003 “Statement on Non-Tenure-Track Faculty Members” noted a concern that earlier calls for conversion of non-tenure-line positions to tenure-line positions had not provided clear guidance for the ethical treatment of faculty members in positions that could not be converted to tenure lines. The statement explained that the MLA Executive Council wished “to make sure that departments cannot make personnel decisions on the basis of financial exigency, eroding the limited job security enjoyed by [non-tenure-track] faculty members, while citing MLA committee reports to imply that MLA-recommended practices are being followed.” The statement included a comprehensive set of guidelines on the treatment of non-tenure-track faculty members.

In 2008, the MLA released Education in the Balance: A Report on the Academic Workforce in English. Created by the 2007 ADE Ad Hoc Committee on Staffing, the report painted a picture of employment in higher education as a whole and in English studies in particular that confirmed the growth in reliance on a contingent faculty. The report echoed earlier concerns about the erosion of tenure-line positions as a percentage of all positions, but it also provided clear guidelines regarding the working conditions and professional status of faculty members in contingent positions:

We are deeply concerned to note the dramatic increase in the number of English department faculty members hired outside the tenure track. While working to define an appropriate role for the non-tenure-track segment of the faculty and limit its size, we must ensure that those colleagues employed outside the tenure track have the appropriate salaries, working conditions, status, rights and responsibilities, and security of employment.

The importance of ethical treatment for all faculty members had become widely accepted by 2009. The MLA, in an issue brief published that year, argued, “All college and university teachers, whether in full- or part-time positions, on or off the tenure track, need to see themselves as members of one faculty working together to provide a quality education to all students” (MLA Issue Brief). After addressing such issues as compensation, participation in governance, professional status, job security, and working conditions, the brief concluded, “When all teachers are appropriately compensated and are active participants in curriculum planning, student advising, and campus life, then learning flourishes and student retention and completion rates increase.”

By the end of the decade, the reports, position statements, and resolutions issued by professional organizations in English studies showed recognition that the growth in contingent positions was unlikely to be reversed. The NCTE, in 2010, and the MLA, in 2011, each released detailed position statements that addressed, among other issues, working conditions, compensation, shared governance, and professional status (“Position Statement on the Status”; Professional Employment Practices). Both organizations also pledged to provide Web-based resources intended to support labor actions at the local level. In addition, the arguments made by leaders of the MLA, ADE, NCTE, and CCCC reflected an awareness that the battle for tenure lines had largely been lost. The modest overall increase in the number of tenure lines had been overshadowed by the far greater increase in contingent positions. Yet the belief in the value of long-term security of employment embodied in tenured positions had not
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Dimmed. In 2009, the MLA Delegate Assembly passed a resolution recommending that “[a]ll college and university faculty members—full- and part-time—should be eligible for tenure” (“Resolution from the 2009 Delegate Assembly”). This recommendation was echoed by the NCTE in 2010: “Instructors should be afforded the opportunity to earn tenure or, in the alternative, ‘long-term security of employment’ as teaching specialists” (“Position Statement on the Status”). Clearly, the value of tenure had not diminished over the more than two decades since the Wyoming Resolution had been published. What had changed, however, was our understanding of who might be eligible for it.

This brief history of the evolution of reports, position statements, and resolutions issued by professional organizations within English studies raises the question of whether these documents shape or reflect discourse in the field. As members of some of the groups that have contributed to the development of these documents, we can state with confidence that many of the individuals working on these documents do so to influence discourse and, ultimately, action on national and local levels. Our experience suggests, however, that this goal is somewhat naive. Although documents such as the Wyoming Resolution have clearly had a strong influence on debates within the discipline, they have led only indirectly to changes in the status and working conditions of our colleagues employed in contingent positions. What value, then, do these documents have? Our answer is that they can provide important direction for discourse at a national level and, through this discourse, can support action at the local level. Operating on the assumption that, indeed, “all change is local,” we turn next to a discussion of the impact of organizational position statements, resolutions, and reports within local contexts. Our analysis considers several local cases, each representing a distinct but typical set of challenges for faculty members working to bring about change at their institutions.

Supporting Local Action

Although we believe that the statements from professional organizations have had little measurable effect on the national phenomenon of contingency within the discipline, there is strong evidence that they have served an important role within local contexts. This is both intentional, on the part of the framers of at least some of these position statements and the leaders of the organizations that have published them, and opportunistic, since advocates for change have used the statements locally to advance their arguments for equity, respect, shared governance, and improved working conditions.

Recently, for example, during his term as MLA president, Michael Bérubé called attention to Josh Boldt’s Adjunct Project, a crowdsourcing project on adjunct faculty salaries and working conditions (http://adjunctproject.com). Noting a similar project that would shortly be launched by the MLA (the Academic Workforce Data Center [http://www.mla.org/acad_work_search]), Bérubé reflected on the potential of these kinds of resources to help faculty members in contingent positions learn “about [non-tenure-track] working conditions more systematically.” He also noted that the data would help “single out institutions that are doing things right” and “identify
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malefactors as well.” These kinds of projects can serve not only to identify best practices and exemplary institutions but also, for those working in local contexts, to support change.

At Colorado State University, we have pursued similar strategies in our own work to support local action. In January 2008, shortly after receiving approval from the NCTE College Section Steering Committee to form what would become the committee’s Working Group on the Status and Working Conditions of Adjunct Faculty, Mike Palmquist invited Sue Doe to join the working group. Sue, who had served in contingent appointments for over two decades before securing a tenure-line position, had worked on a university task force that had developed a robust statement about contingency. Although the report was not published on a sanctioned university Web site, it contributed to several subsequent changes, perhaps the most important being the creation of shared governance structures. These structures in turn led to significantly increased use of open-ended appointments for qualifying faculty members (“Standard Offer Letter”) and revisions to the university’s Academic Faculty and Administrative Professional Manual that recognized senior teaching appointments (“Guidelines for Applications for Senior Teaching Appointments”; “Senior Teaching Appointments”). In an early e-mail message to one member of the working group, Mike indicated that he felt the value of “yet another position statement” would most likely be measured in terms of local action:

I have no illusions that a resolution will do a great deal to materially change adjunct lives. . . . But I suspect (and hope) that a resolution from NCTE might be of some use to faculty as they battle within local contexts to make some sort of progress. And, perhaps, it might help raise consciousness a bit, which can also help lead to change. (“NCTE Adjunct Issues”)

In November 2008, after the annual NCTE convention, Mike informed the working group about a discussion among members of the NCTE College Section Steering Committee, NCTE President Kathleen Yancey, and NCTE Executive Director Kent Williams. Mike reported in an e-mail message that the committee had liked the idea of “trying to do something that doesn’t simply repeat the approaches used in the past” and had voted “to make the development of a resolution (and a supporting Web site that provides examples, support, and so on—essentially, a tool kit for local action) the committee’s top priority for the coming year” (“RE: Report”). In his message, Mike noted that Williams had been particularly interested in “policy level issues (e.g., how we can communicate policy to legislators and government officials and how we might collaborate with other organizations and initiative[s]).” Mike had responded that “those approaches had not yielded positive results over the past two decades” and argued “for the need to provide support for local initiatives,” which he believed would lead, cumulatively, to greater success.

The following January, when the working group was in the midst of developing what would become NCTE’s 2010 “Position Statement on the Status and Working Conditions of Contingent Faculty,” McDonald, a member of the working group, addressed concerns about sanctioning institutions that engaged in exploitive labor practices, as the Wyoming Resolution had called for (“RE: Reminder”). His suggestion, which would eventually lead to an NCTE commitment to create a Web site
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(which to date has not been created) that would serve a purpose similar to that of the Adjunct Project and the MLA data center, was to ask NCTE to “make periodic reports about how programs are measuring up to the standards” that would be set out by the position statement. McDonald explained:

The language could be “objective” and “factual” rather than judgmental: these institutions meet all of the standards, these meet most of the standards, these meet few of the standards. Maybe avoiding terms like “sanction,” “censure,” and “investigation” would eliminate the legal problems and expenses that doomed the censuring passages of the Wyoming Resolution in the late 1980s.

The intention of crafting position statements and sets of resources that would both shape national discourse and support local actions has its origins in early uses of position statements by faculty members in contingent positions (and their allies in tenure-line positions and within the administrative ranks) to work for change within local institutional contexts. It has also been shaped by the observation that leaders at most institutions appear unlikely to enact change solely in response to national calls for reform. Local action supported by the statements, reports, and other resources developed by our professional organizations, however, has been carried out—sometimes successfully—for more than two decades.

McDonald reports that his institution, Louisiana State University, Lafayette, has used the CCCC “Statement of Principles and Professional Standards for the Post-secondary Teaching of Writing” several times since its initial publication. English department faculty members first used the CCCC statement in 1990, during an unsuccessful bid—directed to their institution’s vice provost for academic affairs—to reduce reliance on adjunct faculty members and increase the pay of those who served in such positions. They subsequently conducted surveys of Louisiana writing programs based on the statement (McDonald, “Louisiana and the Wyoming Resolution,” “State of Louisiana Writing Programs,” and “Louisiana Writing Programs”). A decade later, during a teach-in that educated the media and upper administration about issues of contingency, department faculty members cited not only the CCCC statement but also statements published by the AAUP (McDonald, “Campus Equity Week”). One year later, this action resulted in a pay increase, led to the initiation of a still ongoing discussion of contingent faculty issues within their faculty senate, and spurred state-wide conversations about academic labor conditions. The effects, McDonald says, have been cumulative (“RE: Have You Used”).

Similarly, Steve Fox, director of writing at Indiana University–Purdue University, Indianapolis, reports on the writing program’s success using professional association position statements in a collective effort involving the program and its director, the Writing Coordinating Committee, part-time faculty members who were also members of the university’s Associate Faculty Coalition, and the dean’s Office of the School of Liberal Arts, which functions as the center of decision making about hiring and salaries. Together, they used a combination of professional association position statements to argue successfully for the principle of converting part-time positions into full-time lecturer lines. Their argument cited the MLA’s recommendation that courses taught by full- and part-time faculty members be maintained at a 62:38 ratio, the CCCC admonition that no more than 10 percent of courses be taught by
part-time faculty (“Statement of Principles”), and the AAUP’s dual arguments that all faculty members be involved in governance practices and that conversion of part-time to full-time occur if the number of classes taught by a non-tenure-line faculty member exceeds a set threshold (“Tenure”). By drawing on statements from the MLA, CCCC, and AAUP, this collective made a case for the relation of full-time faculty members and quality education, focusing on an extension of the definition of full-time faculty members to include those in full-time, non-tenure-line positions.

At the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs, members of the contingent faculty created a report that used language from the 2010 NCTE position statement. That report is being formalized by university committees and will be published as a rights and responsibilities document (Fitz). Justin Jory, a member of the non-tenure-line writing faculty at the time the report was submitted, noted in an e-mail message that the authors of the report had drawn on the NCTE document’s “broad, interchangeable language” to establish the need to be “viewed and treated as a valued and integral part of the academic faculty.” Jory stated that he and the other authors of the report made direct connections between statements about salary compensation in the NCTE statement and local conditions as they called attention to national compensation standards. Reflecting on the usefulness of professional organization position statements, he wrote, “We were able to use your document [the NCTE position statement] to create a hybrid genre—a program report that was also a manifesto/critique of the program that we then circulated throughout the department.” The statement, added Jory, “enabled us to develop ethos and to build a movement that developed rhetorical velocity.” This use of an institutional position statement to support local action suggests that the resources provided by professional organizations can be appropriated and leveraged by those lacking official authority.

These examples provide some degree of response to Adrianna Kezar and Cecile Sam’s call for additional discussions of local solutions and plans of action (Understanding). Kezar and Sam argue that such efforts may work to develop foundational literature that will lead to better-informed conversations among stakeholders. What cannot happen, they say, is a failure to do something: “Change is inevitable, and the current status quo cannot hold” (115). Arguing for connecting action to research, and vice versa, they suggest the need for “context-based studies” since too much of the existing literature on contingent faculty draws little connection to context (114). One can imagine a series of case studies focusing on sites where position statements have and have not been used to inform policy. What other mechanisms have been at work? How have sites developed their own policies? What form have those policies taken? What motivated the site to be proactive or reactive? How have things worked out for faculty members on and off the tenure line?

Renewing the Case for Tenure

It might be difficult, given the history of documents produced by professional organizations about contingency, to accept the argument that efforts to address this issue are likely to lead to an improved and invigorated tenure system. Yet we believe, despite this history, that attention to the issue of contingency is likely to lead to a
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renewed approach to tenure in the academy. We believe that the point has already arrived at which faculty members in contingent positions are demanding the long-term security associated with tenure. Currently, these demands are sporadic and widely distributed. The AAUP reports that Penn State University, St. John’s University, Santa Clara University, and Western Michigan University have developed successful proposals for teaching-intensive tenure lines and that other proposals have also been made (although unsuccessfully) at Rutgers University and the University of Colorado, Boulder (“Tenure”). Also gaining some traction, the University of California system offers “long-term security of employment”; similarly, the AAUP reports that the City College of New York, the New School, Rider University, Vancouver Community College, and Oakland University have developed structures that offer some degree of job security, providing both a more stable workforce for the institutions and more secure employment for the faculty. Legislative solutions have also been achieved, as suggested by the bill passed in 2012 in Colorado that allows public colleges and universities to enter into long-term contractual arrangements with non-tenure-track teaching faculty members (“Colorado House Bill 12-1144”).

To be viable, an emerging system of tenure that accommodates the economic and institutional needs that have brought about our reliance on a contingent faculty must recognize the significant variance in the duties and interests of faculty members in higher education. The current system of awarding tenure primarily to those who have demonstrated scholarly excellence through publication will not accommodate the needs of an expanded faculty. Instead, we will need to move—as the AAUP, the Coalition on the Academic Workforce, the New Faculty Majority, and other organizations have argued we must—to a system that aligns our evaluation system with the position descriptions that govern faculty work. That is, each faculty member should be judged on the merits of the work he or she is appointed to carry out, whether that work is primarily scholarly or focuses on teaching and service. Faculty members should not be held to the rigid standards of a one-size-fits-all evaluation model, particularly if that model fits only a small number of our colleagues.

Our professional organizations have the opportunity to play a central role in shaping the debate about the merits of tenure eligibility for all members of the faculty. They can do so, however, only if they and their members recognize that the standards currently in place fit only a minority of those who now teach in higher education. If our organizations continue to frame their arguments within an understanding of tenure as it has been traditionally constructed, then new organizations will form to meet the needs of those who seek to make a professional home outside that system. The rapid growth and increasing influence of the New Faculty Majority, founded in 2009, provides an example of the kind of organization that has emerged to meet the needs of our colleagues in contingent positions. Its emergence, as well as the development of initiatives such as Boldt’s Adjunct Project and the University of Southern California’s Delphi Project on the Changing Faculty and Student Success (www.thechangingfaculty.org), suggests that we have arrived at the point where position statements are no longer sufficient to shape the discourse around this issue. We need to publicize and reflect on the outcomes of these efforts, establish partnerships where appropriate, and, perhaps, launch our own projects. These new projects might focus on redefining what
counts in tenure and promotion evaluations, exploring alternative forms of job security, and creating new forms of shared faculty governance, to name but a few of the issues waiting to be addressed. In short, we have a choice. We can sit on the sidelines while others move forward on this issue, or we can join them in working for change.

Note
The authors of this article are listed alphabetically.

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