



**Column: A New Generation in Librarianship**

## On the Outer Balcony of the Ivory Tower: Contingent Librarians and The Academy

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### ABSTRACT

This column explores the parallels between contingent (i.e., non-tenure-track) faculty positions in academic departments and contingent librarian positions in academic libraries, examining how issues of job security, professional identity, and institutional dynamics impact professionals across these roles. Drawing on personal experience and existing literature, the author discusses the implications of her contingent status for job satisfaction, institutional commitment, and career development. The column concludes with recommendations for increasing awareness and advocacy about contingent librarianship within the field of Library and Information Science, emphasizing the importance of addressing labor issues and their intersection with diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts.

### KEYWORDS

contingent faculty, non-tenure-track faculty, academic librarianship, professional identity, job security, job satisfaction

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## Introduction

In 2021, with the trappings of midlife surrounding me—spouse, child, mortgage, worries about my home’s energy efficiency and the status of my mutual funds—I resigned from my position as an instructor at a university to commit full-time to earning my degree in Library and Information Science. I had spent over a decade teaching in an English department prior to pursuing a career in librarianship; I was among the cadre of enthusiastic, creative, committed, underpaid, and overworked composition and literature instructors who teach at community colleges and large research institutions alike. Unlike faculty who are on the tenure track—those with PhDs, hired as assistant professors with teaching, research, and service requirements and the prospect of tenure in the future—with my MA in English, I was off the tenure track, and therefore considered *contingent faculty*.

### Contingency in Academic Departments

Contingent faculty are part-time or full-time instructors who, by definition, have little or no job security (American Association of University Professors, n.d.). Often referred to as *adjuncts*, *instructors*, or *lecturers*, they may work without a contract or with a contract that is very short, such as for a single semester. They may also have little or no job security, benefits, role in faculty governance, or ability to choose their own course materials, and they are sometimes tasked with teaching in subject areas outside their expertise. This is in addition to their notoriously low pay, with \$3,903 per three-credit course being the average for part-time instructors (American Association of University Professors, 2024). This reality often causes part-time contingent faculty to teach at multiple institutions to cobble together what might still be a less-than-livable wage.

Despite “adjuncts” being a widely used term to refer to contingent faculty, the idea that they are truly *adjunct*, or “added, subordinate, supplementary” to higher education (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023) is simply untrue. They are integral to colleges and universities. The latest data from the American Association of University Professors notes that nearly 68% of instructional faculty hold contingent appointments (2024), and they teach an extraordinary number of credit hours, especially at the undergraduate level. As an example, at the institution where I taught for many years, only 28% of course credit hours were taught by tenure-track (TT) faculty in the 2022-23 academic year, leaving 72% of course credit hours to be taught by others, most of whom were non-tenure-track faculty (NTTF) (Institutional Research, Planning, and Effectiveness, 2024).

I was relatively lucky, as far as contingent faculty positions are concerned. Although my position was full-time, with a standard teaching load of four classes per semester, my administrative duties in the composition program usually reduced my courseload to two or three classes each semester to accommodate the additional work. I had benefits, which were available to all employees at my institution who were at least half-time employees; I taught a variety of courses, some of which were in American Literature, the field I had studied as a graduate

student; I had voting rights in most departmental business; I received extra compensation when committee work was outside my effort distribution; and towards the end of my employment, I had a multi-year contract. The relative stability of my position, especially compared with many other contingent faculty across the country, was not an accident. It was due to the hard work of many people over a long period of time who sought incremental gains in pay, job security, and roles in faculty governance on behalf of NTTF.

### **Contingency in Academic Libraries**

Yet after more than a decade of general satisfaction with my career, I sought new opportunities with a career in librarianship. It turns out I am in good company. Many people come to librarianship in middle age as a second or sometimes third career (Lambert & Newman, 2012; Whitten & Nozero, 1997), and many people transitioning to LIS as a second career are former teachers (Moniarou-Papaconstantinou et al., 2015). While my research prior to and during my LIS program assured me that my experience as a university instructor would be useful and valued in my new profession, I had not expected that another aspect of my experience as an instructor—my contingent status—would follow me into the world of libraries.

While the well-studied divide between faculty and staff librarians was explored in my LIS coursework, little mention was made of contingent faculty positions in academic libraries—likely because it is not a predominant theme in the literature of the field. Bailey and Becher (2022) do address non-tenure-track library faculty in their research, noting “non-tenure-track library faculty may be called term faculty, contingent faculty, NTT (non-tenure-track) faculty, or FTNTT (full time non-tenure-track) faculty. This variety can make it difficult when reading the literature to assess who is being discussed and what types of contracts they actually have.” The rhetoric of title, rank, and status matter. Not only do they make research on this issue more difficult, but they also influence how someone is perceived within the hierarchical structures of higher education.

While “instructor” or “lecturer” were the layman’s terms I used when I was teaching in an English department, my official appointment type was much more cryptic and it changed, even though my specific job duties did not. When I began teaching off the tenure track, I was in the group designated as Special and Temporary Faculty because we needed to be re-hired into our positions each year and were therefore “temporary.” A few years later, my colleagues and I were renamed Non-Tenure-Track Faculty—a term that was descriptive but contentious, since my fellow NTTF and I were being defined by what we were *not*, rather than what we were. Later, we became Contract, Continuing, and Adjunct Faculty to encompass those who had multi-year contracts or automatic continuation of their single-year contracts. In all these cases, our designation changed because contingent faculty were gaining more rights and more security, and there was a need for the appointment type to better reflect instructors’ actual status. This, of course, was a good thing. It did not, however, resolve the tension between what my institution called me and how I referred to myself so that others could understand.

In my current role as a librarian at a different institution than when I was teaching, I now navigate a new realm of murkiness related to my title. Outsiders undoubtedly perceive me as tenure-track faculty; my title is Assistant Professor, my effort distribution of librarianship, research, and service is akin to my tenure-track colleagues, and I could someday be promoted to Associate Professor, although without tenure.

What I am able to do, however, is limited by the fact I am Contract Renewable (CR) faculty, defined at my institution as someone who has a contract “for a designated period not to exceed one year and automatically terminates upon expiration of that period,” though “Re-employment of an employee after termination of a contract for a contract-renewable position is solely within the discretion of the University” (Board of Trustees, 2023a). In practice, this means (ideally) that I am re-hired each year; however, if I am not, I would not technically have been “let go” or “laid off”—I simply would not be “re-employed” and I would not have grievance rights since my contract automatically terminates at year’s end.<sup>1</sup> Yet that precarity is unclear to anyone I interact with, whether within or outside my institution. In truth, I am masquerading as tenure-track faculty without the relative security that comes with a tenure-track position, and it is only my disappearance that might make my actual status known to others.

When I was teaching off the tenure track, my contingent status was similarly opaque to my students. As far as they were concerned, I was their “professor”—another educated elite professing from atop the ivory tower. Little did they know how precarious my footing was on the crowded outer balcony of that tower, and I was hesitant to make these inequities transparent. Revealing my contingency to my students made me feel vulnerable—as if it might undermine my credibility in the classroom to be “just” NTTF. It was as if, perhaps, my contingent status reflected my unworthiness to be more in the (supposed) meritocracy of higher education, rather than reflecting problems within a system that undervalues the labor of those who do some of its least glamorous but vitally important work.

### **Realities of Contingent Librarianship**

Libraries are not immune to the realities of contingency. When contingent librarians work alongside those in tenure-track lines, it can create some unusual dynamics. In libraries with both TT and NTT librarians, those off the tenure track had the lowest levels of commitment to their institutions and the lowest levels of job satisfaction of any of the groups surveyed (Becher, 2019). While I personally feel respected and valued for my contributions to the library and feel satisfied with my job, I will admit that I have indeed felt “less than” due to my CR

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<sup>1</sup> It is noteworthy that the decision to rehire me does not rest with the University Libraries, the unit in which I work; rather, it rests with the University itself. To the University Libraries—embodied in the people I work with daily—I am a fully-formed professional and a whole person; to the University, in the context of a budget crisis, I worry I am merely my salary’s budget line that could be eliminated if needed.

status—specifically during evaluation time, when evaluation processes made my second-class status clear.

During annual evaluation processes I am tasked with reviewing the dossiers of my colleagues who are undergoing comprehensive review. While tenured and TT faculty review and then score these dossiers, my status puts clear lines around the extent of my participation: “Contract-renewable faculty may participate in the discussion [of dossiers] and share relevant information, but may only participate in the assignment of scores regarding contract-renewable faculty members” (Board of Trustees, 2023b). These policies effectively disenfranchise me because of my contract type, since although I am asked to do the same work as my TT colleagues, my actual assessment of the work only counts when I am reviewing other CR faculty. While my TT colleagues see the injustice in the system as much as I do, board policy dictates these faculty processes. Unfortunately, academic libraries inherit some of the flaws of their parent, academia, even when the individuals within them disagree with those flaws.

Lest someone think that my contingent status means I am miserable, I am not. I greatly enjoy my new career. It is interesting, dynamic, and impactful, as are my colleagues. Yet the specter of non-renewal takes its toll. I operate as if I will be re-hired; I operate as if the multi-year action plan I developed for my program is something I will see through to the end; I operate as if the goals I set for three semesters from now will materialize due to my efforts. I operate *as if* because I do not know how to operate *as if not*, especially when the likelihood of my rehire is high, but not guaranteed. I am simultaneously aware of both the optimism and the naïveté in this approach.

Do I ardently wish for a TT position? Not necessarily, but sometimes. The potential for a future sabbatical would be nice, as would the job security that comes with such a position. While my NTT status certainly limits what I can do, make no mistake, there are benefits to being off the tenure track. This column is a case in point. Since it is editor-reviewed and not peer-reviewed, I may not have devoted the time to writing it if I were TT, since it does not count as much in evaluation rubrics as other types of publications. I also do not have a tenure clock constantly ticking away, as others do, which is liberating in its own way.

### **Addressing Contingency in the Field of LIS**

All of this begs the question of what those of us in academic libraries are to do about this reality. The fact is, there are likely to be more contingent librarians like me in the coming years, not fewer (Becher, 2019). Even if I do personally feel there are a few perks to being off the tenure track, the downsides are real and difficult, and the lack of job satisfaction many contingent librarians feel likely has profound effects on both the librarians themselves and the work they do. While I believe it is unlikely that the trend of hiring contingent labor in academic libraries (or academia as a whole) will suddenly reverse, there are some things those of us in the field of LIS can do to increase awareness and advocacy:

- *Academic librarians should talk about these issues.* All of us, NTTF and TT alike, should speak about labor issues in whatever conversations or committees seem appropriate. Recognizing and discussing the differences in job security, pay, job satisfaction, and institutional commitment—without shame or feeling “less than”—will make the issues more visible to the Powers that Be.
- *LIS graduate programs should talk about these issues.* While there is not the same volume of research on contingent librarianship as there is about other issues in academic libraries, what does exist should be read and discussed so that new academic librarians will enter the field with a better understanding of these institutional dynamics. LIS graduate students should also hear directly from contingent librarians, whether through in-class visits, virtual presentations, or recorded interviews. There are plenty of us to choose from.
- *We should recognize these labor issues as issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion.* The field of librarianship is striving to be more diverse, which is a laudable goal. Yet if newcomers to the field are relegated in large numbers to positions that potentially lack security, benefits, or adequate pay, then academic librarianship becomes less equitable and less inclusive, even if it is seemingly more diverse.
- *Contingent librarians should join forces with contingent faculty across campus.* Even if our job responsibilities look different, our contingent status—and all that comes with it—unites us. Building new relationships and further developing relationships that already exist between academic librarians and other departments on campus will make us all more visible.

### Conclusion

Contingency has been an unexpected throughline in my career, and if these experiences have taught me anything, it is that this issue needs more attention and advocacy. While the next era of librarianship will undoubtedly be impacted by many things like AI and assaults on freedom of information, too will it be impacted by the rise of contingent labor. Will I still be in an academic library to see these changes from the inside? I certainly hope so.

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