

Introduction to the Presidential Panel, "The Spring from the Year"

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Good afternoon, everyone, and thank you for attending this year's Presidential Panel on the topic of contingent faculty. Most, if not all, of you will have recognized the allusion in my title: Aristotle in the *Rhetoric* tells us that in one of his speeches, Pericles said that the young men killed in the Peloponnesian War had vanished from the city, as though someone had taken the spring from the year. This bleak and beautiful metaphor seemed appropriate to the topic that we are addressing today, namely, the challenges posed to all of us by the increasing use (and abuse) of contingent faculty, and the danger that an entire generation of young scholars, who have worked long and hard to pursue their dream in Classics, will not find gainful or satisfying employment.

The term 'contingent' faculty is somewhat difficult to define, but we use it here to refer to adjunct, part-time, and continuing non-tenure-track faculty. We do not use the term here to include those adjunct and part-time faculty members who have chosen this status deliberately: adjunct faculty, after all, at least in the original sense, were those whose main employment was elsewhere and who could lend their extra-mural expertise to departments; while there have always been some part-time faculty members who have other interests and responsibilities, and for whom a part-time position works just right. Rather, we are talking about all those who, in increasing numbers, occupy such positions from necessity and not from choice.

I confess that I have come late to this issue. Two years ago in Chicago, Barbara Gold, Chiara Sulpizio, and Jody Valentine, under the auspices of the SCS's Committee on Professional Matters, organized a session entitled, 'Contingent Labor in Classics: the New Faculty Majority?' I wish to thank those organizers for sharing information with me and for their very useful advice on the issue. I am ashamed to say that I was not present at that panel, nor were many senior members of the profession, I am told. But as I have learned more about the issues surrounding contingent faculty over the last couple of years, I have become convinced that this is a topic that needs repeated and continuing attention by the SCS. I have used my presidential panel to draw attention to it because I believe that too many of us who are tenured and tenure-track and could make a difference are still not paying sufficient attention.

We in Classics have a long tradition of predicting doom, as a glance at some earlier Presidential addresses would confirm. I was astonished to read, for example, Helen North's 1976 (!) Presidential Address, ominously entitled 'The Yoke of Necessity', where she spoke of 'the contraction of opportunity and expectation' that the field was then facing, and the many dismantling of many Classics programs. She asked, 'Have we taken too lightly—those of us who are tenured and for the moment feel secure—the agonizing plight of our young colleagues who cannot find suitable jobs ...?', and she even talks of finding alternate careers for classics PhD.'s outside the

academy. The issues, of course, were not exactly the same, but again, I worry that our consistent narrative of decline will blind us (or at least make us too readily acquiescent) in the trends of today, trends that really are much more serious and much more threatening to the long-term survival, not so much of our discipline – people will always read and study the Classics, and find ancient Greece and Rome fascinating – as of our profession, as people who are trained and deeply versed in those ancient societies and cultures.

The numbers themselves are startling: in 1970, more than 70% of college and university teachers were on the tenure-track, while 30% were not. Today, the numbers are reversed: of the 1.5 million individuals engaged in teaching at the college and university level, more than 1 million are contingent faculty: about 70%! For the sake of comparison, in 1999, an APA panel on part-time and adjunct faculty were concerned about the ‘grave implications’ in the light of the ‘alarming’ situation that 40% of faculty were then working off the tenure-track. Today, many of these 70% work at or under the poverty line, paid an average rate of \$2,700 per course, and many, moreover, have no benefits and no health care. That is a serious human cost. In addition, as Michael Bérubé and Jennifer Ruth argue in their new book, *The Humanities, Higher Education and Academic Freedom*, the loss of tenure-track positions threatens the entire edifice of faculty governance and disciplinary professionalism. They observe that, ‘the promise of higher education is undermined when 70% of the professoriate is made up of people who can be summarily fired for upsetting the wrong person.’ The vast majority of contingent faculty are dedicated, hard-working professionals, but they are not being treated as professionals. And I regret to say that I have learned that for many, their ill treatment begins at home, in our departments and in our own relationships with them.

Our panel this afternoon has been put together with two beliefs: first that there *is* something that we can do, as individuals, as departments, and as a learned society; and second, that individual and cooperative action can be successful, can make a change, and can be the basis for further, larger efforts at change. You are all well aware that contingent faculty have become essential in the corporate world of today’s financially pressed universities. But if we do not in this panel rail against outlandish administrator salaries or the venomous student-loan industry, or call for the unionization of contingent faculty, that is not because we do not consider these things important, but rather because we wish to focus today on what each of us can do to make this situation better.

I mentioned earlier that I have come to this issue late. If you are like me, let us be resolved that we have not come to it *too* late.

Our procedure will be as follows: I shall introduce each of the panellists who will then give his or her presentation. After all of them have spoken, I shall pose some questions for discussion that were sent in by members in response to my call for such questions in early December; then we shall have time for questions and comments from the audience.