

# Present Tense

A Journal of Rhetoric in Society

## Thinking Collectively about Academic Labor

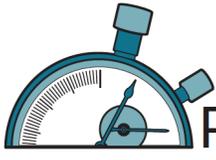
This Rhetorical Life

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## Thinking Collectively about Academic Labor This Rhetorical Life

To the readers of *Present Tense* and listeners of *This Rhetorical Life*: We're happy to have the opportunity to contribute to Present Tense on a topic that we think is important for everyone in higher education: academic labor and creating just working conditions. As you'll hear in this podcast, academic labor is something that greatly concerns us as graduate students, and we think it's an important concern for both full-time faculty and contingent faculty. That's why this podcast features the voices of both full-time (Eileen Schell and Tony Scott are both Associate Professors of Writing and Rhetoric at Syracuse University) and contingent faculty (Jeff Simmons is a Professional Writing Instructor at Syracuse University).

If you're as interested in what our special guests had to say as we are, please check our [website](#) for the extended interview with Eileen Schell.

On behalf of the TRL team, thanks for listening!

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### Transcript for Episode 20: "Thinking Collectively about Academic Labor"

Run Time: 16:31

AH: Allison Hitt (co-executive producer)  
TI: Tamara Issak (host, producer)  
BK: Ben Kuebrich (host, co-executive producer)  
ES: Eileen Schell (special guest)  
TS: Tony Scott (special guest)  
JS: Jeff Simmons (special guest)

Cue music: "N35-40-19-800" by Springtide

AH: You're listening to *This Rhetorical Life*—

TI: the *Present Tense* edition

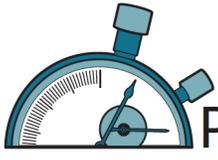
AH: —a podcast dedicated to the practice, pedagogy, and public circulation of rhetoric in our lives.

BK: Hi, everyone. I'm Ben Kuebrich—

TI: and I'm Tamara Issak

BK: —and welcome to this special edition of the show.

Over the past year especially, academic labor has become an issue of growing interest and concern. From Anne Larson's article "Rhetoric and Composition's Dead" to mainstream newspapers like in *The New York Times* to other mainstream media sources like PBS publishing on academic labor. Through each medium, awareness is



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spreading on the conditions of contingent faculty and the fact that most courses at universities are not taught by tenured or tenure-track professors.

TI: Today we have three outstanding guests to help us talk about this issue, and they argue that it is not just an issue for individual faculty to take on or even for specific institutions. And while we may be super involved in our own research and teaching, they help us to realize that we need to pause and consider some larger shifts in higher education and anticipate how those changes will affect our futures in the profession. Because let's face it, we can forget about our research interests, and we can forget about all the things we're involved in on a daily basis. If we don't address these labor issues, then we really won't have any work to do in the future.

BK: Today, we hope to spend the hour addressing these issues, working primarily on the age old question of unjust labor: What is to be done? There is an urgency of addressing the labor issue as faculty, as TAs, and as instructors working in composition and rhetoric. The framework of the show will highlight the potentially dire situation, the reasons why adjuncts unionize, and how organizing has been approached in the past. All that said, let's have a listen to Eileen Schell, who has been researching and writing about academic labor issues for at least 20 years, and she starts by describing her own contingent labor conditions at the start of her career.

ES: I worked in the contingent sector, so I got a Master's in English at University of Washington, and as part of that degree there was an internship program at a local community college--North Seattle Community College. They hired me a week *into* the semester to teach a class, so I started my career in a very distinguished way. I was walking into [laughs] somebody else's class and taking

over their syllabus and their class, and so that was the wonderful world of contingency that I walked into was not having a contract, even as the semester began.

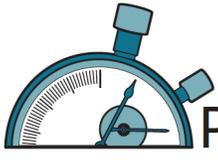
Now I was 24. I just was out of grad school. I had all kinds of aspirations. I thought, *Well, I'll teach here for a while, and it'll turn into something full time, and of course they're going to recognize how great I am and wonderful I am.*

BK: Uh-huh.

ES: I had two other jobs, and like a lot of the people I worked with I had other sidelines. So I worked in a restaurant, and I had my own tutoring business as well as teaching. So I figured out pretty quickly into this *career* as a part-time faculty member that it was going to be a very difficult path, and also I thought it was unfair. I remember sitting there with a number of the part-time faculty I worked with who were 20 years older than me. I was thinking this is not right that these women—many of whom were divorced and were helping support their families if not supporting the family entirely on their own—were getting paid very low wages to do this really hard work of teaching writing. And they would sit there and conference with their students, and I would conference with my students. And they'd be grading papers every weekend or every evening, and I just thought, *this is just a wrong system, so I'll do what I can to go on and get a degree and try to get on the tenure track.* But I also thought, *this is a really important issue to write about and think about.*

*Cue music: "Adventure, Darling" by Gillicuddy*

TI: So while contingent labor may save the university money, Schell has made a strong argument in her scholarship that contingency comes with a number of costs.



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ES: A lot of times, contingent faculty do an incredible job of being incredibly professional in unprofessional working conditions. I think that's the first big cost: the humanity and the economic stability of those folks who are in contingent positions—many of whom are grad students, people who have earned Master's degrees or Ph.D.s, and obviously made commitments to being in higher education and commitments to wanting to teach and be with students. And, ironically, that group that is often the most committed to teaching—the most committed to being there for students—has to just struggle to be in something that they love to do.

BK: In today's universities, over 70% of academic employees are contingent faculty: graduate students, adjuncts, and full-time faculty working off the tenure line. But while these numbers are troubling, Tony Scott offers a surprising look into what may be ahead of us when it comes to academic labor.

TS: For years, we've been trying to agitate for better terms for adjunct labor in academia. You know, just more money and benefits with some—I think—modest successes. But now I think there's an entirely new game. *[laughs]* And the new game is even more erosion of tenure and more loss of governance structures that enable tenured faculty to have control over curricular matters, but also now we're moving toward a model in which I think adjuncts are increasingly gone because we're moving to larger classes, and we're moving to stuff like credit-by-exam that will take the place of a lot of Gen Ed curriculums.

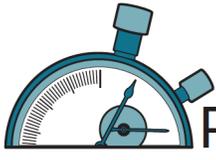
TI: It may be really surprising for us to hear Tony Scott's prediction that adjunct positions will decrease in the future. And you're probably wondering how that could be. We asked Tony to elaborate and describe what this change might

mean for teaching writing and writing teachers. He describes what he calls the “doomsday scenario.”

TS: You do have these models emerging that have students in large lecture classes with, you know, the typical number 200-250 students and then breakouts that are taught by TAs that more resemble writing classes but are more efficient in terms of labor for the university. But I also think that you're going to have highly assessment-driven curriculums *perhaps* so that students are working on their own using computer modules, and then they're assessed out of writing. This is the doomsday scenario, but I really see—that's already happening at community colleges, and I see it encroaching more on more four-year and research institutions as well.

BK: Beyond computerized assessment programs and large class sizes, Tony also points to President Obama's shortened bachelor's degree plan meant to reward institutions for efficiency—part of a decades' long trend in diminishing federal funds for public universities. With all that is coming from federal policy and a climate of austerity that affects our academic labor conditions, Scott argues for a broad view of academic labor.

TS: We all have our noses to the grindstone so much that we feel that things are shifting, but we have a hard time putting it all together and seeing it as a singular, ideological initiative. *[laughs]* Within the field I feel even—it's strange—I feel that the conversation concerning labor is more prominent and yet more contained. I see people being *aware* of the problem, but I also see them containing it away as its own conversation rather than thinking through how it affects every aspect of what we're saying about pedagogy and what needs to happen in the classroom. I also see elements of the field frankly jumping on board



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with assessment schemes, with large class schemes, and with online education schemes that are driven much more by efficiency than by what's best for pedagogy. If that's happening, what we're doing is we're providing a kind of scholarly cover for efficiency measures. So as long as those things are happening, then as a field we're not going to be able to address the trends that we're seeing.

I think we have to argue for the value of what we do, and I think we have to draw—we have to actively, as a field, draw distinctions between writing courses that are open-ended, differentiated, that show ongoing innovation and creativity in the curriculum versus writing as a set of measurable traits that can be acquired before you move on to other things. So in that sense, it's nothing new. I think that things have changed so much structurally over the last ten years that faculty [*pause*] to a certain extent are just being left out of the equation. I'm not sure how much of a voice we have in the process anymore. I frankly wonder how much control we as a discipline can assert over the direction that our work takes. That doesn't mean we give up, but it does mean we have a lot of work to do.

BK: Next we talked to Jeff Simmons, a Professional Writing Instructor at Syracuse University, and he shares his experiences organizing and forming communities of solidarity. He has been working at SU for 12 years and was around when part-time faculty across the campus organized a union, adjuncts United, which is part of the NY State United Teachers and the American Federation of Teachers. Their union drive led to another local college to also unionize its part-time faculty, and Jeff describes here the major benefits to a union.

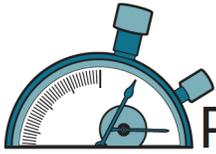
JS: Well I would say job security. I don't know, respect is a very—it's one of those abstract nouns, right? I think—I guess it's job security, but

there's a sense that management can be maybe a little less arbitrary. There's still dialogue between the union and both the Writing Program and even the university, and these things come up. I don't think people are mean-spirited. A lot of times, people just don't know what it's like.

But I think it's worth it. We were lucky. I mean, there was that crash in 2008, and a lot of us were very glad that we had the union then and as the university starts cutting and whatever they're doing.

TI: The success of Adjuncts United at Syracuse is obviously a hopeful sign. And we asked Eileen Schell if there were things about the struggle for just working conditions that she found hopeful around the country. She started by mentioning the recent and, at the moment of recording, ongoing strike and labor organizing happening at the University of Illinois at Chicago. UIC is an important example because, as Schell notes, contingent faculty and tenured faculty are bargaining collectively to address these issues.

ES: That's really hopeful to me that you have full-time, tenure-line faculty saying, "The conditions of contingent faculty are so important to us that we will agree to strike and that this is an important issue." I think that's a really hopeful sign because in the past you might see full-time faculty playing off contingent faculty, saying, "As long as we get our raise, we're fine." But I think more and more this notion that contingent faculty are the new faculty majority—they *are* the faculty majority. That message is out there that if tenure-line faculty don't organize with or care about the conditions of contingent faculty, they basically—they/we because I'm part of the full-time, tenure-track faculty—we don't care about our own conditions. We don't care about higher education. But I think that there's a tendency in higher ed to



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sort of, you know, worry about what's going on in *your* classroom and in *your* particular office or in *your* particular research.

I think people are starting to see that higher education has fundamentally shifted. It's fundamentally shifted in its employment agreements and contracts. And the administration of many universities is *more* than happy to higher people off the tenure track, *more* than happy to have a campus where *most* of the people are going to be contingent, and I think full-time, tenure-line faculty have finally figured out that they've got to throw their lot in as workers. Like, we have to start thinking of ourselves as *workers*, as those who come together to try to make teaching and learning in higher education a possibility. And if we don't think about that and we don't create better employment conditions for *all* of us, then we won't have a university as we know it.

Tl: Like Tony Scott, Eileen Schell argues that we all ought to pay more attention to the fundamental shifts in higher education and do something before all of our jobs are at stake. She sees learning to speak out and be a department and university citizen as part of that work. She starts by describing how graduate students stay quiet about academic labor conditions and the problems that that silence creates.

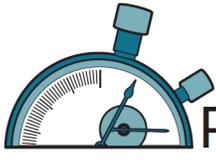
ES: You learn to be inactive. It's sort of like not exercising: so you don't exercise your voice, you don't exercise your political agency, you don't exercise your ability to join a community where you're going to be able to influence the outcomes of that community. And so then you're rusty. When you get out and you become a faculty member, then you're like, "Oh, I can't say anything. Until I have tenure, I can't say anything." And then what I see is a whole group of faculty

who never spoke out in grad school, never spoke out when they were untenured assistant professors. By the time they get to be tenured when they're going to "speak out," they don't even know how to do it. They don't remember what they *thought*, they won't say it, they're *afraid*.

And I have to say I've been very outspoken my whole life. I've been called into the office of administrators over the years to be told that I said or did this or that, and to me it's sort of like, "So what? [*laughs*] I have to live with myself." If someone wants to take my job and ruin my career because I spoke out, then I have to be able to get up the next day. And I've always had this belief, and this comes I think out of more of a working class background and of a farm family, I just always thought—I was taught you speak up when you think something's wrong, and you don't just sit there and take it. And you're not foolish, on the other hand, and you're not like a loose cannon, but you speak out.

What I've learned over the years is that people tend to respect you for it, so I think grad students need to realize that the professional that you're going to become starts in grad school. People know that: they know they're supposed to publish, they know they're supposed to get their coursework done, they know they're supposed to become a good teacher. But they also need to become a good department citizen in grad school. You really need to learn how to do that and find ways to do that.

Tl: As graduate students in a composition and rhetoric program, we are aware of and deeply concerned about these issues. Our hope is that we can start a dialogue that moves beyond the personal need to find secure jobs to broader understandings and collective action toward just labor conditions for all writing teachers. The



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concern goes beyond adjunct and TA pay, although those are critically important. We need to consider how these recent shifts in higher education affect the quality of education for students and the quality of life for instructors and the quality of knowledge production at institutions of higher education.

BK: Jeff Simmons, contingent faculty member at SU, reminds us of the value of speaking out and organizing with others to advocate for change. Tony Scott helps us to take a broader view, not just looking at individual workers or campuses but at national trends and what he calls a “singular ideological initiative” toward efficiency and away from thoughtful pedagogy. Eileen Schell encourages us to think collectively as workers and to find tactical moments for intervention—to learn *how* and when to speak out and to start doing it now.

*Cue music: "Multitudes" by Gillicuddy*

BK: *This Rhetorical Life* is brought to you by graduate students in the Composition and Cultural Rhetoric program at Syracuse University. Executive producers of *This Rhetorical Life* are Ben Kuebrich and Allison Hitt with additional production and editing from Karrieann Soto, Tamara Issak, and Jana Rosinski.

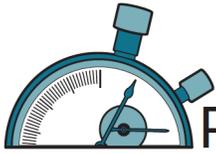
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*This Rhetorical Life* is a podcast produced by Syracuse graduate students in the Composition & Cultural Rhetoric program that seeks to create and connect conversations going on (and ongoing) throughout the field—representing the different voices, matters of concern, assertions, debates and questions that continue to develop from disciplinary discussions. It is the mission of the podcast to be accessible for a diverse group of listeners. We hope the program topics serve as a means of navigation for newcomers and a space of provocation for those already situated within the field. Conversations are dynamic; it is our work to reflect the same level of engagement.

Ben Kuebrich studies, writes about, and participates in movements for social justice and focuses on the use of narrative within these movements.

Jana Rosinski is interested in the materiality of the field—both longstanding and ephemeral texts—in relation to methods of creation and curation, and matters of access and connectivity.

Allison Hitt is interested in disability studies and digital literacies, specifically focusing on how we can craft writing pedagogies (and multimodal scholarship!) that are physically and intellectually accessible to diverse student bodies.

Karriann Soto is determined to explore cultural rhetorics of music media production/consumption and nationalist rhetorics, specifically in the context of Puerto Rico and in the work of other DiaspoRicans.

Tamara Issak is interested in the cultural rhetorics of Muslims and Arabs in America.