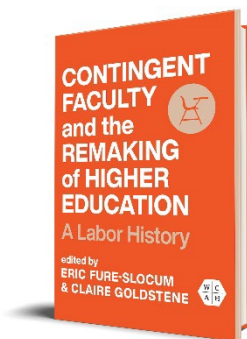




Center for the Study of Academic Labor, Colorado State University

## Reading & Discussion Guide for *Contingent Faculty and the Remaking of Higher Education: A Labor History* (2024)



*Contingent Faculty and the Remaking of Higher Education: A Labor History*, edited by Eric Fure-Slocum and Claire Goldstone, examines the realities of contingent academic work through the lens of labor history. Essayists investigate structural changes that have caused the use of contingent faculty to skyrocket and illuminate how precarity shapes day-to-day experiences in the academic workplace. Other essays delve into how contingent faculty have engaged in collective action, seeking to resist austerity measures, improve their working conditions, and instigate reforms in higher education. By challenging contingency, this volume issues a clear call to reclaim higher education's public purpose.

The questions and prompts below, roughly following the table of contents, are designed to guide your reading and discussion about the book. We hope this will help spur conversations about the essays in the volume, and, more importantly, prompt reflection and action on the problem of contingency, as it is presently being experienced and contested, wherever readers gather. We also hope that this guide can evolve, adding new questions for future readers to consider.

### Framing Contingency in Higher Education

- How would you describe the main problems we face in higher education today?
- How has contingency remade higher education, as the title argues?
- How is this rise in contingent labor evident where you work?
- Discuss how the book's descriptions of contingency in colleges and universities do or do not reflect what you have experienced?
- How do labor histories of contingency help us to frame the current moment? What other frameworks are useful, for both grasping the main problems and for planning action?

### Part I: The Making of a Contingent Faculty Majority

*This section examines the history and structure of contingency in higher education.*

- What accounts for the rise in contingency in higher education?
- To what extent is the increasing use of contingent faculty baked into the system of higher education (especially in the US)? What other factors are at play in the making of a contingent faculty majority? Or can we point to administrators' and policymakers' decisions that have deepened contingency?
  - Who or what is responsible for the "remaking" that you see underway?
- How are gender, race, and class integral to academic workers' increasing precarity?
- How are students' struggles tied to contingent faculty challenges?

## **Part II: Contingency at Work and in the Workplace**

*This section explores the experiences of contingent faculty, especially day-to-day challenges.*

- Take a few minutes to reflect on your experience in the academic workplace.
  - Do the descriptions and analyses here resonate with your experience? Which stories particularly resonate for you, and why?
  - What if anything appears to be missing from the picture here? What would you like to add to these narratives?
- “Contingent faculty” is a broad category. Discuss differing experiences, depending on for instance: short- and long-term contingent faculty; differing lengths of contracts; teaching on a single campus vs. “freeway flyers”; graduate student workers vs. adjuncts; lines of race, gender, sexuality, ability, and class.
- Return to the list above and discuss shared experiences and common interests of contingent faculty, despite differences. What unites these groups of academic workers?
- How would you describe tenure-stream perceptions of contingent faculty? How are these reflected in day-to-day interactions?
  - If you are a contingent academic worker, how have you experienced tenure-stream faculty in your working life? As allies, colleagues, comrades in the struggle? As obstacles or antagonists? How so?
  - If you are a tenure-stream faculty member, how have you felt the impacts of contingency in your workplace? How do you relate to contingent academic workers in your department, college, or university?
  - What obstacles prevent more contingent and tenure-stream faculty from working together for positive change? What can be done to overcome those obstacles?
- Discuss the connections between contingent faculty working conditions and students’ education. How have degraded or precarious working conditions affected your ability to teach your students? Your ability to pursue scholarship?
- How do contingent labor conditions endanger academic freedom, for you or others? What are the broader implications when academic freedom is undermined?
- Beyond teaching and scholarship, how does contingency affect you professionally, psychologically, or emotionally? Relations with colleagues or community members?
- Some essays note less obvious ways that contingency has actually helped them to be better teachers, scholars, or activists. Does any of this resonate with your experience?
- What are other effects of rising contingency on higher ed institutions and the communities they serve?

## **Part III: Challenging Precarity and Contingency in Higher Education**

*Essays in this section discuss collective action—labor organizing in higher education.*

- With the rapid growth of higher education organizing, these essays capture just a slice of this recent history.
  - What are faculty doing to improve working conditions, pay, and benefits?
  - What can we learn from the successes and shortcomings in the book’s examples?
  - What other examples can you point to from your own experience, study, or struggle that are of interest here?
  - What other organizing campaigns and academic worker unions should people be made aware of and learn from while developing effective strategies?

- What are the strengths and weaknesses of different types of bargaining units, especially as we consider the range of types of academic employment—from graduate student workers, to adjuncts, to long-term non-tenure track faculty, to tenure-stream faculty?
- Discuss differences in academic workplace organizing, depending on type of institution (e.g., public vs. private universities), state, or country? How do factors such as institutional type or regional location and legal context affect the prospects for organizing? What obstacles need to be overcome in the context where you work?
- What should administrators do to change this situation? What should policy makers do? How can they be encouraged, persuaded, or pressured to attempt these changes?
- What examples from the book, or from recent history, hold out the promise for the kind of changes you would like to see happen?

### **Paths Forward for Academic Labor and Higher Education**

- Discuss the role of solidarity in attacking the day-to-day slights and the isolation of contingency, as well as for building power. In your experience and/or examples in this book, what are the most effective ways to achieve solidarity?
  - What should solidarity look like in the struggle against contingency?
- Discuss the impact of precarity on contingent faculty, but also on tenure-stream faculty. While the harmful impacts of rising contingency on contingent faculty themselves are increasingly clear, the impacts on tenure-stream can be harder to see.
  - How does the rise of contingency negatively affect tenure-stream life and labor?
  - How are other academic laborers affected, including graduate student workers, staff, and campus service workers?
- What are the common interests that **all** faculty and campus workers have in combating contingency today?
- Authors in the book argue that contingency undermines higher education’s “public purpose,” or the “public good of education”? Do you agree? How so? How should this be addressed?
- What's missing from this book? What do we need to know more about?
- Any other insights about contingency that you gained from this book?
- Where do the institutions you know fall on the spectrum of case studies in this volume?
- What are the paths forward that will improve working conditions, serve students’ educational needs, and strengthen higher education?
- In your opinion, after reading and reflecting on this book, what must *we* do to remake higher education?

***CONTINGENT FACULTY AND THE REMAKING OF HIGHER EDUCATION: A Labor History***, edited by Eric Fure-Slocum and Claire Goldstene (University of Illinois Press, 2024).

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