

The Poverty of Academia: My Life as Non-Tenure Track Faculty

Sarah Prior, Michigan State University

Abstract

Non-tenure track (NTT) positions include faculty who teach full and part-time and are not on the tenure-track. These positions include full-time lecturers, fixed-term faculty, etc. Positions such as these are typically on one-year contracts, though some may be on 1 - 3 year contracts. While the title, pay and status, among other things, varies by institutions, it is undeniable that universities and colleges have been shifting in recent years to this kind of contingent labor force. These positions also include part-time adjuncts including professionals teaching a class here and there, and professional teachers who may teach at many institutions. Individuals who are not on the tenure-track often find themselves with little job security, an often inequitable distribution of labor (in terms of class preps, class size, etc.), and in positions that pay significantly less than their tenure-track counterparts' salaries.

Keywords

Non-tenure track faculty, poverty in academia, adjuncts

At a recent conference I was at a roundtable discussing the trials and tribulations of contingent/non-tenure track (NTT) faculty. As we all discussed the difficulties of balancing heavy teaching loads, service work, and our own scholarly agendas, not to mention families and work/life balance (if there is such a thing), a graduate student raised her hand and asked, 'why, if these jobs were so 'bad' why did I 'choose' this career path'. Her comment exposed the continuing assumption that academics choose to be in NTT positions. While this is true for some people, for many, myself included, my 'choice' is dictated by several other factors including the changing nature of the academic job market and my family situation. NTT positions include faculty who teach full and part-time and are not on the tenure-track. Positions such as these are typically on one-year contracts, though some may be on one to three year contracts. While the title, pay and status varies by institutions, it is undeniable that universities and colleges have been shifting in recent years to this kind of contingent labor force. These positions also include part-time adjuncts, professionals teaching a class here and there, and professional teachers who

may teach at many institutions. Individuals who are not on the tenure-track often find themselves with little job security, an often inequitable distribution of labor (in terms of class preps, class size, prep time, etc.), and in positions that pay significantly less than their tenure-track counterparts salaries.

As I ponder the struggle of poverty in academia I must first express and acknowledge my privileged status. I have a partner whose work provides our family with financial security. If it did not, my own work in academia would not even keep me above the poverty line. The issues I focus on in this essay focus on my own 'worth' in terms of academia and my conception of poverty. I struggled to write this because I felt like an imposter discussing my own experiences given my class status and acknowledge that many other academics with similar credentials have it much worse than I do. I keep in mind faculty that are living at or below the poverty threshold as they teach and recognize that while we often experience similar things in terms of our 'value' to our universities, financial security provided by my partner gives me a privileged experience as contingent faculty.

Journey to NTT Position

My journey to my PhD started in 2008 (not a good time to be starting a Ph.D. program in the midst of the financial crisis). My goal had always been to have a tenure track (TT) position, with while being able to teach, research, and change lives. My journey toward a TT position has been paved with frustration, like that of so many others. While the social science job market has improved in recent years and continues to get better in many ways, the compounded nature of the adjunctification of academia and my own family/life situation have positioned me as a contingent NTT laborer since I obtained my degree.

After I graduated in December 2012, I did not have a TT job lined up for a variety of reasons. I took a faculty associate position teaching for two separate schools at my doctoral Alma Mater and was paid barely more than the money I made as a graduate student. I continued to apply for TT jobs. By April I still did not have a TT job so instead, I accepted an instructor position at the university where I received my master's degree. The job was a 4:4 teaching load, four new preps, and happened to be two and a half hours away from where I lived. I took the job for a variety of reasons: I needed full-time work, university benefits are excellent and with a small family that was important to me. I wanted to have an institutional affiliation, the position paid triple what I was making as an adjunct, and my mother lived in the city so I had free rent and my daughter could spend some time with grandma. Since then I have held four separate positions in two states. While I had some security (I use that word very loosely) in my job as an instructor and my later position as a lecturer, when my family moved I lost any semblance of job security.

The adjunctification of academia has been a growing concern for scholars in recent years. The inequitable labor distribution, the 'demise' of tenure and job security and the increasing devaluation of scholars all contribute to the attention to this issue. As institutions of higher learning continue to move toward more corporate-based models of teaching, there continues to be immense changes in the lives of academics, particularly parenting academics. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) issued a statement expressing concern that the growth in non-tenure track faculty can undermine academic freedom, educational equality, and

collegiality. Universities around the country have established conferences, workshops, and paper presentations about the changing nature of colleges and universities. Clearly these issues remain relevant in the life of academics in general, but specifically for graduate students, who like myself, are in NTT positions.

The two main areas I will focus on here are the inequitable pay of NTT faculty and the lack of connection to the institution. As a NTT faculty member, I am considered less-than my TT counterparts. Essentially, I am not perceived as a true faculty member, merely a 'temporary' staff that does not have the same status as the full-time faculty. This 'temporary' nature of work has only increased since I left my full-time NTT position and became a part-time employee. While full-time NTT faculty encounter significant disadvantage in terms of workload distribution, job security, pay differentials, among others, the experience of most part-time NTT faculty is significantly worse. Here, I am not referring to part-time faculty who are professionals in their field and teach a class here or there, or the individuals who have no desire to have a full-time, benefit eligible teaching position. Instead I am talking about faculty who, like myself, piecemeal courses together at multiple institutions in order to keep faculty affiliations, pay bills, and for some, survive. It is this piecemealing that further distances part-time NTT faculty from institutional relevance and support.

Struggles Faced by NTT Faculty

Being a NTT faculty member (full-time or part-time) it is not just about the classes or the money. It is also about the connection to the institution and the field. Often I feel as if my status as a NTT faculty affects people's perception of me as a scholar. When I do have the chance to go to meetings, or I talk to faculty at my or other universities, I often feel like I have to provide a caveat as to why I am not in a TT position. I say I am on the market (which I feel like I have been on forever). I say I have had on campus interviews (which are hard to continue to go to when, in the end, they go with someone with more experience). I say I recently relocated and am looking for positions in my new area (true, but the secret fear behind that is that there may never be a TT position available in my field at a close university and that my search perimeters have significantly decreased). I also fear that when they look at me they think I am not a legitimate scholar/researcher since my life as a NTT is not by 'choice'.

As a NTT faculty member, every semester feels like starting over. When I had a full-time position, each academic year I was sent a letter indicating that my position was essentially disposable. While the likelihood that they would have terminated full-time lecturers who teach the majority of their classes was unlikely, getting a letter each year indicating you are expendable does not promote a feeling of job security. Living on a one-year contract is disheartening. This is amplified as a part-time faculty member as I get these letters every semester. Each institution tells me my employment has an expiration date. Not being in a TT line means that I usually have significantly less lead-time for course prep. For example, this semester, I was offered a class three days before the start of the semester. I got access to the course shell for the online class on the day that class started. This kind of short notice is not 'normal' but often I have only a few weeks to prep syllabi, order books, and do other course related prep. It also means that I have very little 'choice' in what courses I teach. I am often given the courses they cannot fill. This means that since I got my degree I have taught 24 different classes/new preps (in 9 semesters).

While I do not have specific data, I would guess this is more than most faculty on a TT line. For TT faculty who teach 4:4 loads at teaching focused institutions, my guess would be that while the number of classes is similar, the number of preps is not.

NTT faculty additionally have to struggle with legitimation issues at an institutional level. Beyond just struggling for classes, NTT faculty are often not eligible to apply for grants or research funding. They are not able to be PI on research grant applications and instead have to work with TT faculty members in order to submit grants. While I am not knocking collaboration, not being able to submit something on your own is frustrating and arbitrary, particularly in departments that require a Ph.D. for even NTT faculty. These requirements further the feeling of inadequacy experienced by NTT faculty.

Mothering and Family Responsibilities

The compounded, intersectional, nature of these issues become even more pressing since I am a mother of two young (non-school-aged) children. As a mother of two young children, childcare costs are a very relevant aspect of my life. As many others have written about in recent years, motherhood can be treacherous territory for new academics; especially ones who are not in secured positions (Evans & Grant 2008; Frank Fox, Fonseca & Bao 2011, Nzinga-Johnson 2013). Women experience motherhood in the academy in a variety of ways. Some institutions are more welcoming to mothers than others. As Waxman and Ispa-Landa (2016) point out, there seems to be a 'baby penalty' for women academia. The fact that academic men continued to fare better in 2017 highlights the gendered bias that exists for women in the academy.

I had my first child at the end of my doctoral program and my second child while teaching in a full-time, non-tenure track position. Each presented its own challenges. As a graduate student I struggled with childcare. Pay for a graduate student is minimal. For me personally, this was exacerbated by an institutional environment that frowned upon bringing my child to campus or with me to meetings. While I pushed back on that system as much as I could, there were days that this meant hiring childcare.

I had my second child while I was a non-tenure eligible lecturer at the same institution at which I had accepted the instructor position. As a lecturer, I made roughly two thirds of the salary of a TT faculty member. I taught a 4:4 or 3:4 teaching load often with multiple preps while my TT colleagues taught 2:2 or 2:3 loads. While this labor distribution is under the auspices of TT faculty conducting research and publishing, in my own circumstances, and the circumstances of many NTT faculty around the country, we too are still required to publish and conduct research because we are eternally on the market. If we did not continue to remain relevant in the field how would we ever get that yearned for TT position?

As an independent scholar (what I prefer to call myself versus travelling adjunct), my financial income has significantly declined. When I left my NTT lecturer position to move with my partner whose job supports us, I cut my income in half. And, as many of us understand, it is not always just about the number on the paycheck. As a non-benefit eligible employee I also lost great health care and was not eligible for university health care at any of my three institutions. So in addition to making less income, I was paying significantly more in health care expenses.

Last semester one of my institutions offered me an additional class to teach. Accepting this class would have meant putting both my children in daycare for two additional days per week. The cost of the childcare was significantly more than the pay for the job. This frustrated my chair as she needed it covered and assumed I would take it and showed little recognition that I would have actually be paying to work.

As I sit here trying to disentangle my economic experiences, it is nearly impossible to not discuss how these experiences were not just about money, but were about deeply gendered systems. Children are expensive. Health care is expensive. It often feels like being a woman is expensive.

The Poverty of Academia

In these ways, I continue to *publish and perish* in terms of my financial advancement in academia. I often teach more students, have more course preps, do not have faculty development support to attend meetings and conferences, and get paid significantly less than faculty with the same credentials. My students are often shocked when they hear that I chose not teaching a class because it would have actually cost money to work. My story is unique in the sense that particular circumstances led to my current state of existence. But as unique as my story is, it is not unfamiliar and shockingly common in this tumultuous time in academia.

When the call for this special issue came out, it was hard not to respond. The editors were looking for submissions that discussed a broad range of experiences that included publishing and perishing; cultural capital; employment and debt; failed academic job searches; demands of travel; the faltering academic job market; parenting while professor; negotiating want vs. need; part-time faculty income/debt; perceptions of competence and sharing/community building. So, publishing *and perishing, check*. Since I graduated I have published two journal articles, one edited book, six book chapters, one blog, two textboxes, two encyclopedia entries, and one reading guide/set of discussion questions. This is what is published and does not reflect work in the pipeline including articles under review and in progress. Loss of cultural capital, *check*. My contingent status and cross country move cost significant cultural and social academic capital. Failed academic job search, *check*. That feels like the story of my life. And while each year gets better and I have more on campus interviews, my change in geography has severely limited my job search capabilities. Parenting while professor, *check*. Issues related to this are multifaceted. The monetary struggles and having work cost more (i.e. because of childcare costs), the maternal guilt, the stress of taking on additional classes in order to financially contribute, institutions punishing mothers at worst, and being indifferent at best. Being a mother academic gets harder the farther from TT I go. Part-time faculty income, *check*. It's awful. And while some institutions are better than others, I often make the same per class that I did as a graduate student only with a degree and without health benefits. Perceptions of incompetence, *check*. This seems to get worse for me the farther from degree conferral I go. I could go on...

I will say that it is not all doom and gloom. I am much better off than many others. As I said, I have the privilege of having a spouse who works incredibly hard and can provide for our family. My most current institution pays better per class than the other two I have recently worked for and provides me the title of Assistant Professor, which, makes a significant difference when students engage with me. It also looks better on professional correspondence. I am beginning to

establish connections and starting to create community in my new environment, which is hard after any move but is even more difficult given my part-time status. This is slow going, especially since I spread my time between institutions. Having worked at several institutions over the last several years, I have had the opportunity to create relationships with incredible academic who are supportive and compassionate. I have collaborated with other academics who push me as a scholar and encourage my own academic growth. This has been particularly helpful especially when institutional support is not always there.

Reflecting on the current state of academia it is hard not to recognize the rampant inequity. While the degree varies, countless faculty experience a precarious existence due to an ever-increasing corporate and institutional model that devalues scholars. This devaluation is compounded when you are a scholar of color, a woman, a mother, working class, LGBTQ, the list goes on and on and on. As Warnock (2016) highlights, experiences of academics in the precarious existence as nontenure-track is punctuated by feelings of inadequacy, a sense of alienation, and exploitation. As universities and colleges continue toward the path of adjunctification, upward mobility within academia for faculty at the margins seems continuously out of reach.

Author Bio

Dr. Sarah Prior is an Assistant Professor in the Sociology Department at Michigan State University. She is also a Faculty Associate in the School of Social Transformation at Arizona State University. She received her Ph.D. (2012) in Justice Studies from Arizona State University. Her research primarily focuses on gendered violence specifically looking at campus sexual violence, academic inequity for nontenure-track faculty/contingent workers, intersectionality, and gender and sexuality issues more broadly.

Bibliography

Evans, E. and Grant, C. (eds), (2008), *Mama, PhD: Women Write about Motherhood and Academic life*. Rutgers University Press, New Jersey.

Frank Fox, M., Fonseca, C. Bao, J. (2011), 'Work and Family Conflict in Academic Science: Patterns and Predictors among Women and Men in Research Universities', *Social Studies of Science*, vol. 41, pp. 715 – 735.

Nzinga-Johnson, S. (ed.), (2013), *Laboring Positions: Black Women, Mothering and the Academy*, Demeter Press, Ontario

Warnock, D. (2016), 'Paradise Lost? Patterns and Precarity in Working-class Academic Narratives' *Journal of Working-Class Studies*, vol. 1 no. 1, pp. 28 - 24

Waxman, S., and Ispa-Landa, S. (2016), 'Academia's 'Baby Penalty': Men Fare Better in Academia than Women – Especially Women who Have Children', *U.S. News & World Reports*, Feb. 11, accessed 19 December, 2017,

<https://www.usnews.com/opinion/knowledge-bank/articles/2016-02-11/academia-must-correct-systemic-discrimination-and-bias-against-mothers>