

June 19, 2023

What follows is some of the framing by organizers for HELU's "Strategies to Abolish Faculty Contingency" conversation on June 20. This is a living document and will change in response to the conversations we have together.

Contingency is an overarching condition

Contingency is an overarching condition of the multi-tier system of employment in higher education. Contingency includes precarity, lack of academic freedom, and generally degraded working conditions. Other aspects of this multi-tier system include inequities in pay, pensions, health care, workload, date of hire, inclusion in shared governance, and access to many other benefits (sabbatical, other leaves, state disability, offices, staff support) that make high-quality teaching and research possible. Denial of access to these affects more than just the working lives of individual faculty. Contingency undercuts and ultimately prevents the exercise of academic freedom, which is the essence of faculty work in the classroom, in governance, in research and the public sphere, throughout the whole higher educational system. And it creates conditions that are deeply unfair, unhealthy, and exploitative, denying a growing majority of faculty—especially adjuncts—the support our jobs require, stoking cynicism and resentments across educator ranks.

The inherent bias of existing hierarchies

While higher ed workers face contingency and the lack of a living wage, our students face high tuition, high student debt, and degraded learning conditions caused by our degraded working conditions. Through the erosion of higher education as a public good, teachers, other campus workers, students, parents, and the public all face increased contingency and precarity. Our bosses, neoliberal capitalists and right-wing oligarchs force more risk onto us, partly by creating and maintaining elaborate, growing hierarchies and varieties of contingency that divide us. Among the most pernicious of these hierarchies are those based on race, class, gender and sexuality, evident in debilitating structural hierarchies throughout U.S. society and history.

Tenured and tenure track faculty still tend to be more white, male and privileged than the broader population. Contingent and exploited faculty and other workers are more likely to be women, people of color, LGBTQ+, and from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Furthermore, institutionally speaking, the colleges and universities that serve predominantly non-white and working-class student populations tend to be those with the most contingent workers. While this is not a surprise, it is also not natural. And as student populations have become more nonwhite, state money has usually flowed toward those elite institutions with a higher proportion of white students, or just flattened or declined, reflecting the political power of conservative elites. When we organize to challenge contingency and hierarchies in higher ed, we challenge larger hierarchies and inequalities.

These multi-tier hierarchies and divisively-applied contingency are not just in our institutional structures; they are in our heads, our emotions, our ways of connecting (or not) with one another. There is an awful lack of understanding between those who benefit the most from such hierarchies and those most exploited within them. How do we organize against the subjective as well as the external things that divide us as higher ed workers?

As organizers from higher education unions across the country, we fight every day for higher education as a public good. But we are at a crossroads. We have to organize beyond our individual unions and organizations. That's where HELU comes in.

HELU: Wall-to-wall and coast-to-coast

HELU is a big-tent coalition of higher ed workers. Our motto, wall-to-wall and coast-to-coast reflects the fact that virtually all higher ed workers are increasingly contingent or precarious in some way or another. We are well aware of the daunting challenges to such ambitious goals. But given the scale of the problems we face, we have no other choice. As organizers, we have lots of ideas about what needs to be done, but we also know that we need to listen to those we are trying to organize – and those you are trying to organize.

That's what unites us; more and more of us have nothing to lose but our contingency. We're not going to wait until every higher ed worker is a gig worker.

We look forward to joining in conversation with you at the upcoming Confronting Contingency meeting on June 20. We anticipate that this will be the first of a series to be held this summer. Help us chart this path.