

Don't Call Me Professor!

John Boe

As someone who has been teaching full time off the tenure track at the University of California, Davis, since 1981, I am grateful for David Bartholomae's "Teaching on and off the Tenure Track: Highlights from the ADE Survey of Staffing Patterns in English" (see pages 7–32 of this issue), which is a careful, fair, and thorough discussion of the staffing of English courses in the United States. And I am especially grateful that David has asked me to write a response to this piece. That he would ask a nontenured person to respond is typical of his fair-minded approach.

First of all, I want to talk about what to call me, what this report necessarily calls me and others like me—minority groups lacking power are often sensitive about the nomenclature supplied by those in power. And so, at the risk of seeming petty, I must admit that I do not like being called a non-tenure-track faculty (NTTF) member. To me it echoes the phrase “non-white.” After an almost thirty-year career, I do not like that the only way to refer to me seems to be in terms of what I am not.

Bartholomae explicitly rejects the “inappropriate” term *contingent*. And I think *adjunct*, a term he avoids, is also not acceptable, connoting so explicitly a lower, nonessential status. And I have always hated being called *affiliated faculty*, a term many at my university have liked to use, because I know that *affiliated* derives from the Latin word for *bastard*, and I like to think of my career and position as legitimate.

In everyday public usage, students and colleagues (including tenured colleagues when they introduce me) sometimes call me “professor.” I think allowing anyone to call me “professor” contributes to the invisibility of NTTF that Bartholomae astutely calls attention to: “Yet they remain largely invisible to all others in the department except the chair, the director of com-

position, and the director of undergraduate studies — those responsible for staffing the large number of sections taught outside the tenure track” (18). I do not mind “teaching faculty,” of course, but tenured faculty should mind, for they also teach, though not usually as many classes as the untenured.

It used to be that in the army if an enlisted man called a sergeant “sir,” the sergeant would respond, “Don’t call me sir — I work for a living.” And so when a student calls me “professor,” I am likely to respond, “Don’t call me professor — I work for a living.” I know some professors work very hard, but none of them teach as many classes or grade as many papers as I do. Like the sergeant in the army, I believe that in most cases I work harder than my superiors do.

I prefer to be called a lecturer, for indeed that is my title, but of course not all NTTF members are lecturers. At my institution (but not at many or maybe any others), I have another title. Because UC Davis has historically had so many agricultural researchers who were not part of the regular faculty, they for many years had an Academic Staff Organization to represent these people. In the early 1980s as the university expanded and hired more and more NTTF, this group objected to being called staff, since staff were not teachers or researchers, but rather the invaluable people who do most of the work of making the university run. So, with some drawn-out opposition from the tenured, we eventually changed our name to the Academic Federation (in parallel with the Academic Senate). And so at UC Davis, I can also be fairly called Academic Federation faculty. Near the end of this response essay, I suggest another solution to the problem of what to call us nontenured people.

When I first came to be a lecturer at UC Davis (a Research I university—that is, a university engaged in extensive research activity), entirely motivated by the desire to stay in my Berkeley home, there was a six-course workload, two each quarter, with twenty-five students in each class. The policy was that after six years, NTTF would be let go. But in the mid-1980s we unionized (to the horror of some of my tenured colleagues) and won the right to be reviewed for renewable three-year contracts if we were judged excellent. The university in negotiated response raised our workload. I have by and large been treated fairly, often generously at UC Davis, especially in comparison to lecturers at other institutions. (The only institution/writing program I know of that might treat lecturers better is the University of Denver.) I am lucky to have had the non-tenure-track career I have at UC Davis, and I am grateful to the institution and to many individuals. This grateful and honest acknowledgment must now lead to what is by and large the “But” sec-

tion of my response to the report. I proceed by quoting from Bartholomae's highlights and from the report itself and by responding to these passages.

■

To preserve the current category of research faculty in English, and to improve the working conditions of those outside the tenure track, we will need to create jobs appropriate for a full-time teaching faculty, ideally by consolidating part-time lines. The jobs available should offer true career options, including *long-term* career options, with appropriate pay and benefits, with full participation in the life of the department and the institution, and with participation in departmental governance. (27)

How could I not applaud this recommendation (even as I smile at the need for scare quotes over “research” — it is hard to know what to call each other!). But I simply do not believe there will ever be full participation of NTTF in the life of the department and the institution. Since the Association of Departments of English (ADE) report shows a trend toward decreasing numbers of tenured faculty and increasing numbers of NTTF (a trend I wager will continue), the tenured cannot afford to give suffrage to the untenured. If I and my fellow lecturers had the vote at my institution, the first thing I would do is try to raise the teaching loads of those professors who do not do sufficient valuable research. I think they know that other NTTF would similarly have some ideas that the tenured might be uncomfortable with, and so the NTTF will never be given full voting rights.

As I have already said, I have been delighted with my career at UC Davis, and my only real objection is that I do not have suffrage. When, for example, the Academic Senate a few years back was asked for a vote of confidence in the chancellor, they voted yes — but I who did not have a vote would have voted no, and I expect almost all other NTTF would have voted no as well. When we hire new faculty, my recommendations are considered, and I have sat on the hiring committee, but — despite my status as an award-winning teacher — my vote there finally does not count.

I have written to our faculty/staff newspaper (*Dateline*) with a modest proposal: that lecturers' votes count as much as those of pre-Civil War slaves. Thus, each lecturer would count as three-fifths of a vote, and our tenured masters would cast these votes for us. And indeed, this would be an improvement over the current situation. I do believe my tenured director of the writing program would vote in my interest most of the time, and that

three-fifths of a vote placed for me would be better than no vote at all. I was not really joking with this proposal, but *Dateline* not only declined to print my letter—they declined to answer me at all.

■

Many institutions have policies that allow for (or demand) variable teaching loads for tenure-track members of the faculty. If, as happens, a career loses its research trajectory, then the number of courses increases. To my mind, this is a reasonable expectation, but everything depends on how one defines “research productivity.” And this discussion is fraught and contentious. (27)

This passage comes from the section of Bartholomae’s recommendations. My response, and those of the colleagues I have quoted this to, is disbelief. I know Ernest Boyer recommended such variable teaching loads in the late 1980s and early 1990s; he recommended them in person in 1993 to UC Davis’s Academic Planning Council, which I was on—because of the openness of one particular vice-provost to lecturers’ contributions. But I have never heard of a tenured faculty member at UC Davis or anywhere else having their course load increased in response to a lack of publication. I would love a statistical survey as to how often this happens.

When I was on the Academic Planning Council, I got to talk about workload with a prestigious chemistry professor who became chair of the Academic Senate. He explained that chemistry professors taught only two courses a year because they have to direct laboratories. This made sense to me, but I asked if there were any chemistry professors who did not direct labs. A few, he told me. I asked if they taught more than two courses a year, and he seemed horrified by the impertinence of my question. I got the sense that increasing a professor’s workload was not a discussion that could ever be on the table.

■

The staffing patterns we chart in our report, and the multitiered faculty they represent, are the product of a distinction between research and teaching—or between a research faculty and a teaching faculty—that has become fundamental to institutional thinking. Provosts and deans use the distinction to define their commitments to general education and to justify the resources required to support a tenure-track, “research” faculty—lighter teaching loads, assignments in advanced courses only, research support, including leaves and grants and fellowships, and competitive salaries in an increasingly competitive market. (25)

This is a fair summary by Bartholomae of the current situation, but if the distinction between research and teaching faculty is so fundamental, should not the ADE at some point actually investigate the quality and quantity of research actually being produced, “fraught and contentious” (27) though such an investigation might be? Have not we all known professors who at some stage of their career stopped doing research, or at least stopped publishing for many, many years? If we want to support humanities research, we should not just support it for a class of people because of their titles, but rather for a group of people who actually do this research. “Teaching loads are lower now than they were twenty years ago; expectations for productivity are higher,” Bartholomae writes (25). But is productivity actually higher? Why can we not have a survey of this productivity? How much research and publication actually get done that deserves support?

Let me be clear that I, like Bartholomae, believe in the “importance of research in the humanities.” I have published such research, and I edit a journal (for which most years there has been no editorial release time). I have continued to do research because I believe in it, not because my institution is rewarding me for it. Because I am a lecturer, by and large any research I do does not count toward advancement. So I think we should verify that the lighter teaching loads given to my tenured colleagues actually do result in valuable research, as I am sure much or even most of the time it does. I doubt it does all the time, and in those cases the professors ought to have their teaching loads raised.

I would also like a future ADE survey of how much institutions subsidize the publication of their faculty’s books. Two years ago, a friend of mine, a writer, not an academic, had a book accepted by a university press. When he met with the editor, the editor asked how much my friend’s department would be contributing toward the cost of producing the book. My friend revealed that he did not have a department. The editor was surprised and admitted that this was a problem. Two years later, external funding seems to have been secured, and the book may soon be published. How often, I wonder, do institutions or departments subsidize the publication of faculty books and then reward the faculty member for having published a book?

It’s not really even just this. How much do departments (and in our case, the taxpayers) subsidize the production of the research by giving the professor time to do the research, which the professor then gets extra merit pay for and (in some cases) the proceeds from the research? So the taxpayer funds the research, but the faculty member accrues all the monetary benefits.

■

And it is currently the case that tenure-track faculty members play a limited role in the lower division; they teach primarily majors and graduate students. We are serving an institutional logic, then, that goes something like this: While enrollments have increased, the numbers of English majors and English graduate students have not increased substantially (if at all). What have increased are the numbers of students needing to take required English courses—lower-division, general education courses in composition and literature. The tenure-track faculty are not appropriate for these assignments; they have shown little interest in general education. Besides, the thinking goes, these courses do not require active researchers as instructors. Therefore, we will provide the *teaching faculty* necessary for these courses and, in fact, will increase the number of full-time nontenure lines as a sign of the importance we place on these students and the mission of general education. A persuasive argument for an increase in tenure-track lines, then, will require evidence that tenure-track or research faculty have a crucial role to play in the lower division, in general education. (25)

Pardon my bluntness, but at my institution the tenured and the tenure-track faculty do not like to teach composition or general education courses because it is too much work. I have occasionally taught large-enrollment literature courses (from 80 to 300 students), and the main pleasure has been in how much easier such a course is than a composition course—especially the second time, when the bulk of your lectures have been created. The tenured English professor has by and large left composition behind (the rhetoric/composition professor is another story). Literature courses (where teaching assistants do the bulk of the grading) and graduate seminars (where graduate students do the bulk of the work) take less effort than do composition or general education courses. Is it any wonder that those in power (the professors) avoid the courses that are more work? I might do the same thing, were I in power.

■

How accurate is the assumption that the employment of non-tenure-track faculty members, both full- and part-time, saves money for the institution? Will the assumption about institutional savings withstand a cost-benefit analysis? There are the transactional costs of administering a constantly changing workforce: advertising and searching for, interviewing, deploying, reviewing, rehiring. How much of the costly time of senior faculty members and administrators is absorbed in maintaining this workforce? Likewise, to what extent are the multifarious service tasks of the academic enterprise—advising students, writing references, directing theses and

independent studies, working on departmental and institutional committees, interacting with the community — concentrated on expensive tenured faculty? Some non-tenure-track faculty members perform such service, but many do not; and, for good reasons, part-time faculty members seldom do.

- We recommend that departments undertake an analysis of the costs and benefits of non-tenure track staffing. We encourage our colleagues to examine these issues rather than to continue to administer the current labor system without systematic analysis of its real financial costs. (ADE Ad Hoc Committee on Staffing 2008: 18)

This section is in the original ADE report but not in Bartholomae's highlights. Bartholomae recommends against a rotating and increasingly part-time nontenured faculty, but this passage assumes that indeed the NTTF is "constantly changing" and thus more costly than it seems. At my institution, many administrators over the years have wanted to make lecturers constantly changing, but, largely because of our union, they have not succeeded as well as they have wanted to. But I would welcome an analysis of the costs and benefits of NTTF at institutions like mine (which should be the model), where the lecturers have been allowed to keep their jobs long term. These lecturers by and large make less money than professors of the same longevity, and in my writing program they teach seven courses a year rather than the professor's four. Again, I would like to place a wager on how this cost-benefit analysis would actually turn out.

And at a Research I university, a professor's course load is not just the courses he or she is paid to teach; any cost analysis needs also to consider the cost of training the teaching assistants who do the bulk of the paper grading for the professors and the cost of the teaching assistants' salaries. And perhaps there should be a cost-benefit analysis of teaching very small graduate seminars and of running graduate programs in general, including the costs and benefits for the graduate students; Bartholomae produces a not very encouraging "map of the realm of employment possibilities in English departments" that "should be distributed to every new class of graduate students" (13).

■

Far from being intentional strategic behavior driven by university boards, presidents, provosts, or deans, decisions to hire non-tenure-track (NTT) instructors are usually made in departments, and the forces that promote NTT hiring in elite research universities are much more subtle than direct orders from the top. Most university

leaders have only the vaguest idea how many NTT instructors they employ. . . . University leaders generally leave these decisions to departments and programs. The decisions to hire lecturers and adjuncts fit what Cohen and March describe as decisions rooted in organizational routines: “The ‘decisions’ of the system as a whole are a consequence produced by the system but intended by no one and decisively controlled by no one.” (Cross and Goldenberg 2009, qtd. in Bartholomae: 31)

This passage, from John Cross and Edie Goldenberg’s *Off-Track Profs: Non-tenured Teachers in Higher Education* (2009), quoted by Bartholomae in an endnote, gives the “academic administrator” point of view, which basically says no one is in charge. I have heard these kinds of claims from academic administrators before. Once when I was the untenured director of composition at UC Davis, I was (mistakenly) invited to a meeting of chairs and directors (I was, after all, a director). At the meeting the dean explained that various lecturers were being terminated, despite being excellent teachers, because of “financial realities.” I talked back here, and found my voice more emotional than it has ever been before or since at an academic meeting, telling the dean, “Financial realities are not created like the weather by God but rather are the result of decisions made by people, many of whom are in this room.” I was not invited back the next year. Academic administrators are in control, even if they do not want to admit their responsibility or culpability.

I once read an article by an African American anthropologist, who said that the difference between white folks and black folks is that black folks know when they are lying. In this regard, academic administrators sure have white folk behavior, for from my point of view they are lying when they say no one is in charge, that they are just obeying economic realities. They are paid very well to be in charge, and they ought to admit that they are in charge. And they ought to admit the “financial realities” do not seem to be such a working force when they are talking about expensive graduate programs or other Senate faculty perks.

■

So here is my recommendation based on a careful reading of Bartholomae’s highlights and the original ADE report: eliminate tenure. If you are worried about free speech (something I have not seen a lot of professors use over the years) and other rights, organize and unionize.

Why should a professor want to live in a world with a permanent non-voting underclass, no matter how well treated? I am a PhD from the University of California, Berkeley, I have published, I have worked at my institution

for almost thirty years. Why can I not stop being a “non,” an invisible faculty member?

Do professors ever think about how lecturers talk among themselves? “I’m so glad to be a Beta. It must be frightfully hard being an Alpha,” one of my colleagues likes to say, invoking the Brave New World quality of our educational class system. Others of us use worse taste, describing ourselves with the N-word, distinguishing between house lecturers (who work as administrators) and field lecturers. Once, during a strike, someone suggested we all monogram yellow L’s on our clothes. And how we bristle when we routinely get e-mailed announcements about positions or grants we are not even allowed to apply for, no matter what our qualifications. How I resented it when I applied for a technology grant and got it, only to find that the next year lecturers were made ineligible for this grant. How we commuters resent it when on the train or vanpool we are grading papers when our research-burdened Senate colleagues are reading mystery novels! How we resent it when, as has recently happened, rules are made so that lecturers cannot feasibly be hired to teach in other departments, those relatively cushy “content” courses many of us are well qualified for. (Speaking of which, Bartholomae spends some time talking about how the tenured ought to teach in the lower division; well, the untenured, depending on their qualification, including publications, should be eligible to teach in the upper division and at the graduate level.) “Economic realities” are now such that lecturers are more expensive to be bought out by another department than are professors (who can be bought out at the cost of the *cheapest* lecturer who could be hired to replace them). And my institution really is among the best there is in the treatment of lecturers, with the treatment by and large getting better over the years (especially once we broke off from the English department). Why, when I was director of composition in the late 1980s, I could not use the photocopy machine across the hall from me because it was for the English department tenured and tenure-track faculty. I had to walk across a parking lot to make a photocopy. As one of my tenured friends said to me, “At least you can use the water fountain.” I now happily share a photocopy machine with Writing Program untenured and tenured colleagues (and the tenured are generous, fair, and hard working, my friends). Yes, things have improved for lecturers in some ways, and in some ways they have gotten worse. But it will never be good enough.

There is no problem with being reviewed every three years to prove that you are still doing your job excellently. Professors regularly pass similar reviews for merit and step increases. Why should anyone have a job for life

no matter how well they do the job? Why not work toward a world where we are all equally called “faculty,” where some of us teach more, some of us do more research, some of us make more money, and we all have one vote? Hey, for now I’ll happily settle for three-fifths of a vote.

Work Cited

ADE Ad Hoc Committee on Staffing. 2008. “Education in the Balance: A Report on the Academic Workforce in English.” New York: Modern Language Association of America and Association of Departments of English. www.mla.org/report_aw.