

By Paul Baltimore

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“There is no doubt we are in one of the most turbulent and challenging times in American, and world, history,” Paul N. Friga recently wrote in the Chronicle of Higher Education, “The coronavirus is dramatically changing everything: Our personal lives, economic markets, and, of course, higher-education institutions are being transformed before our eyes.”

All of us working in the community college system, whether full- or part-time, are experiencing these unprecedented challenges, and we know the most painful are yet to come. As faculty, we are deeply concerned about the future for our students, our colleagues and their families, and California’s higher education systems. Although everything is uncertain at the moment, the budgetary impact of this crisis on the California Community College system is likely to be much greater than the 2008 recession. Difficult decisions will be made that affect every one of us and, as in 2008, the impacts of those decisions will be felt first and most devastatingly by part-time faculty.

Even in the best of times, the positions of part-time faculty are precarious. That is what it means when the work we do is contingent. What the coronavirus epidemic is revealing is just how dependent many workers in the United States are on temporary, contract, or gig work for their livelihoods and how dependent the country is on them. Unions and advocacy groups have worked to mitigate some of the rough edges of contingent employment in good times, but being a part-timer is fundamentally founded on uncertainty. The problem is not located at any particular college or district. It is a structural issue that demands attention on the state and national level.

Now is the time for part-time faculty to mobilize and to communicate with each other and with decision-makers, administrators, board members, and legislators.

It is true that we are living in unprecedented times. But the epidemic of contingent labor and the instability of the system long preceded the coronavirus.

When the Los Rios Community College District where I teach closed its doors three weeks ago in response to the COVID-19 crisis and went into “remote operations,” part-time faculty started to mobilize. Organized by the Los Rios College Federation of Teachers’ Part-time Faculty Caucus, we began by opening up the conversation through Zoom. These gatherings, which often meet twice a week and may last up to three hours, give part-timers a much-needed forum to share information about the constantly changing situation, to strategize, and express our anxieties about the future. In this uncertain time, they provide a space to organize as a group and a conduit to our union representatives.

Reflecting the structural nature of contingent employment, the concerns expressed by part-time faculty are exacerbated issues that predate the current crisis. Chief among them has always been job security. Some departments have already announced the cancellation of summer classes which are most often taught by part-time faculty. With an anticipated drop in funding for next year, the fall semester schedules are being reevaluated to prepare for class cuts. This will impact part-time faculty through reductions in FTE and the necessity of full-time faculty to make load. Presumably, this is happening all across the state, affecting the immediate futures of instructors, counselors, librarians, and nurses in every district. Staying mobilized and informed about these changes is necessary to ensure that whatever contract provisions exist for part-timer rehire rights (e.g. preference system, seniority) are honored by administrators.

Not surprisingly, unemployment is a major theme of our discussions. Some of the gatherings have become virtual workshops on filing for unemployment. Again, this has long been an aspect of life as a part-timer. Our local union, the Los Rios College Federation of Teachers, has long held regular sessions on unemployment insurance and published a “Guide to Unemployment Benefits” at the end of each semester. The crisis has not introduced unemployment into the lives of part-

time faculty, but accentuated the impact of a condition that we experience normally at least twice a year. Of course, there has been a dramatic expansion of unemployment in response to the coronavirus, and with it a number of changes in the process for filing. As a group, the Part-time Faculty Caucus shares information about these changes and works together to revise our own internal documentation on the process for filing.

In the spirit of our mission to build community, regular meetings of the Caucus are dedicated to pedagogical workshops on strategies for teaching online. The emergency transition from on-ground to distance teaching in mid-semester has been a turbulent experiment for everyone in higher education, one that will continue through the summer and likely in some form through the fall. The training often required for online work, whether classes, library work, or counseling was already a source of inequity for contingent faculty. Full-time faculty may be compensated for such professional development through their salaries, while part-time faculty need to make time such training unpaid. Even if work is available, many fear they will be denied due to the inequity in opportunities for professional development that have long been a feature of contingent employment.

It is true that we are living in unprecedented times. But the epidemic of contingent labor and the instability of the system long preceded the coronavirus. The problems of job security, unemployment, and professional development are just a few of the issues that part-time faculty have faced every semester for many decades. There is a very real danger that this crisis and social distancing will increase the atomization that was already endemic to the part-time faculty experience. That is why it is critical to increase our sense of community and our communication with each other, our union representatives and advocates, and our districts. ■