Response Essays

Just Which "Few People," Anyway?
A Response to Marc Bousquet

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There's no question that my essay "New Faculty for a New University" did not represent anything like systematic and thorough "research" on full-time teaching positions—or, to be honest, "research," as Marc Bousquet terms it in "Composition as a Management Science," of any sort. Indeed, I thought I said so pretty clearly in the essay itself. In a footnote partially cited by Bousquet, in fact, I describe my knowledge of full-time teaching positions as having been gathered "on the basis simply of my own idiosyncratic and limited professional experience ([since] as an instructor, I seldom have the opportunity to visit other campuses or meet colleagues from other institutions)," and I go on to suggest in the following sentence that "A systematic study of the positions could be expected to reveal far greater numbers" (37). I did not assume naively that I'd somehow invented the idea, or that I was writing in support of something not already "in the air" in the field, as one of the article's referees in fact put it. And I don't imagine most of CCC's readers did either.

Ultimately more to the point, though, I would argue that many of the positions emerging lately for full-time teachers are different in important ways from most of those held by the "full-time faculty working off the tenure track" (Bousquet 506) that preceded them, and that Bousquet's history risks conflating them in problematic ways. Of course, given how variably positions for full-time teaching-intensive faculty have always
been defined on different campuses, it’s very difficult to date their emergence statistically with great accuracy: the convenient label “full-time nontenure track” (Bousquet 505) used in most studies, for example—and again, this is not the term I use in the passage Bousquet invokes here, or most anywhere else when I can avoid it—includes many (perhaps a majority at different moments, especially in the 1970s and 1980s?) who are not teaching-intensive faculty at all but traditional teacher-scholars in training, likely serving as sabbatical replacements or holding down lines in danger of retrenchment, just as the term in turn excludes some “lecturers” now working wholly or almost wholly as teachers on lines with tenure-like provisions. But it seems to me difficult to contend that there isn’t indeed a tangible and exciting sense of experiment about the sorts of lecturer tracks now being formalized and/or refined very publicly at places like Georgia State, Duke, and Princeton—tracks that I believe share little with the sort of temporary, disenchanted “full-time adjunct” positions Bousquet seems to have in mind. These experiments involve explicit attempts to deal with precisely what I tried to point out in “New Faculty”: that the much-discussed exploitation and “invisibility” of regular part-time faculty is the product of a systemic unwillingness to staff all sections of all courses with faculty supported as active researchers, and that the ever-growing teaching substructure in higher education does vital work that needs to be honored and cultivated professionally with reasonable financial and intellectual support. Admirably, these programs (and some others) are trying honestly and in good faith to begin recognizing full-time teachers unsupported as researchers—as legitimate academic citizens with plausible career paths and who, like it or not, visible or invisible, teaching on single or multiple campuses, have been a significant constituency in academic culture for at least two decades and show no signs of going away. And yes, to my mind, meaningful career-track roles had only quite rarely been imagined as a possibility for university faculty not on traditional professorial lines—faculty who define themselves mainly or exclusively as teachers—before the very recent past.

But I worry that Bousquet has misrepresented my position in far more fundamental ways: my “pragmatism,” as he describes it, has by no means made me ready either to give up on the prospects for collective action or—especially—to concede tenure for teaching-intensive faculty, as he clearly assumes. In fact, in a footnote Bousquet congratulates me on having given up a position he wrongly attributes to me in the text of his article—advocating for “full-time nontenurable positions”—when I wrote on the
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same topic later in the Chronicle of Higher Education (521, 504). But I clearly say in the CCC article (in a sentence nearly adjacent to another he quotes, in fact) that what I had in mind “involved some combination of traditional research-informed faculty and full-time tenurable teaching-intensive faculty” (25; emphasis added). Indeed, it seems to me difficult to imagine that readers would assume I’d given up on the possibility of tenure for such positions given that I note (this time in a sentence immediately following one Bousquet quotes repeatedly) the existence of provisions for tenure-like arrangements for lecturers at UC and CUNY (37)—along with, later, the positions of AAUP General Secretary Mary Burgan and then-MLA Executive Director Phyllis Franklin on the issue of tenure for full-time instructors (37, 38).

Despite Bousquet’s resolutions about securing “the tenure-eligibility of persons who concentrate on teaching,” (521) the automatic quality of Bousquet’s mistake here indeed seems to me a very good example of the in this debate, which as I suggest in “New Faculty” seems to me far more about the great teaching/research divide in academic life than it is about tenure in principle: apparently, in the end Bousquet simply can’t imagine that I’d actually propose tenure for teachers who are not active researchers—or at least that anyone would be willing to give it to them. It is he himself who has inserted “nontenurable” (Bousquet 504) into my description of the positions “those teachers could grow into over the course of a career”: it’s simply not in my text (24; Bousquet 504). In fairness, I believe this is genuinely a wholly unconscious slip on Bousquet’s part. But I also believe it reveals a good deal about Bousquet’s assumptions about the proper institutional place for those who teach, and especially for those who teach composition. Of course, I will say that I don’t expect that full-time teaching-track positions are likely to be immediately accompanied by tenure provisions on every campus—and, shameless pragmatist that I indeed confess to being about securing improvements in real working conditions, I would encourage faculty involved to take what they can get where they can get it. (Contrary to what Bousquet seems to imagine in his discussion of bosses and workers, by the way, I’d submit that it’s much easier to resist pragmatist compromises when it’s someone else’s job that’s under discussion.) But the whole foundation of my argument in “New Faculty” was precisely that non-research-oriented does not mean non-permanent and should not mean non-tenurable. This much would seem to me difficult to miss.

Admittedly, I don’t discuss collective bargaining in my article, and I do argue that it’s rhetorically disadvantageous to limit our arguments for
improving the working conditions of academics entirely to fairness of employment rhetoric—to "expressions of moral indignation alone," as I put it, "no matter how appropriate, well-founded, or eloquently articulated" (18). But I also don't know why this would make Bousquet assume that I am hostile to or dismissive of unions. Am I wrong, for one thing, in thinking that arguments made on the basis of "the discipline's ability to offer students consistently rigorous and effective instruction in advanced literacy" (18)—rather than focusing on exploitation and unfair practices alone (particularly in ways that tend to minimize the work of committed, long-term, often highly accomplished instructors, casting them as "freeto-flying" "pretend professors")—are not necessarily accommodationist, lending themselves to a laissez-faire sensibility about the market for academic labor? Aren't these arguments ones that unions can and do articulate to great effect? Should I ask the negotiators from my own union at the table with the State of New York as I write to refrain on principle (so as not to submit at any level to "managerial" logic) from pointing out the contributions and effectiveness—indeed, the cost-effectiveness—of SUNY faculty wherever they imagined such arguments would be rhetorically advantageous as they try to secure a now long overdue contract? What's more, though any reader of "New Faculty" will recognize that I do have reservations about traditional faculty culture's readiness to see itself as labor, I feel compelled to note that this has not prevented me from participating in College Equity Week activities, giving public support to an SEIU strike on one campus where I was then teaching, continuing to support student activism on tuition policy and faculty activism on governance and assessment issues on the campus where I teach now, advocating for work-life improvements for part-time and nontenure track instructors in my own department, or having regular discussions with colleagues—especially my union rep—about my union's policies on nontenure track faculty, as well as about what can be done to improve its bargaining position in general. And it's worth pointing out, too, I suppose, that those reservations have also not prevented me from observing in a response to the letters from "New Faculty for a New University’s" readers that "no passive form of leveraging will ever be an entirely effective substitute for systematic and united faculty organization and activism" ("On" 158) or from declaring in a roundtable sponsored by and published in Workplace, the online journal Bousquet edited at the time, that "Over the long haul, organizing all faculty as a labor force seems to me the best way to work against" the "corporate sensibility" increasingly widespread in higher education ("Abolish"). Indeed, I intended the opening section
of "New Faculty" to serve precisely as a call to traditional faculty to abandon the "general academic culture of withdrawal from the world" and to applaud the recently evolving inclination to move beyond the stance of "purifying intellectual isolation" that has long prevented many in the professoriate from recognizing their work as labor (15). And I am hopeful about the possibilities of this emerging inclination in a new generation of faculty.

On the other hand, it's difficult for me not to agree with Evan Watkins' observation in his response to Bousquet that the sort of collectivity Bousquet imagines requires uniting groups who perceive themselves as having very different interests—either that, or leaving someone out. Ready to recognize their function as academic labor or not, that is, I worry about the professoriate's readiness to recognize its shared interests with the teaching substructure—simply, to rub shoulders with instructors—a spirit that, respectfully, I can't help but hear echoed in Bousquet's own positions. Let me put it this way: what campus constituency represented the most deeply entrenched resistance to initial attempts to consider creating equitable full-time jobs for lecturers at the university described in "New Faculty for a New University?" The local AAUP chapter, anchored by senior faculty on traditionally conceived professorial lines, who perceived the creation of teaching-intensive positions, even tenurable ones, as an encroachment on the privileges afforded to traditional faculty. 3

So I won't bother spending a great deal of time here pointing out that I didn't have in mind "positions paying less than $30,000 for a five-five load" (Bousquet 505) or that, like Joseph Harris, I don't see myself as an advocate for a lower-management strategy of "obeisance and cajolery" (Harris 893)—or wondering if no princes were ever pleased at Louisville to help create that department's enviable working conditions. The issue here to my mind, as Watkins has begun to suggest, is the willingness of Bousquet and similarly positioned professorial colleagues to see his interests as shared with faculty working in roles unlike his own, which, as Harris and Peggy O'Neill suggest, may at the same time be a question at least in part of disciplinary allegiance. When Bousquet invokes the grassroots activist savvy of the composition proletariat admiringly, that is, calling the field's "professionals and managers" to learn effective "institutional critique" "from the workers in their charge," it's clear that he indeed has in mind a particular "sector" of workers only: not long-term instructors dedicating careers to their intellectual work in the classroom, but graduate students, a large number of whom at most universities work
in literary studies, serving apprenticeships in composition courses on the way to careers as traditional teacher-scholars (518, 517). It’s unequivocally “the graduate employee unionist” (Bousquet 924) who becomes the hero in the vision Bousquet offers in his response to Watkins, Harris, and O’Neil—and who Bousquet ultimately seems to pretty much equate with “composition labor” in general (924). What about instructors’ ideas about how best to move for work-life improvements, instructors’ often very successful attempts to organize, and—especially—the kind of professional lives instructors envision for themselves? So far as I can tell, they are nowhere to be found in Bousquet’s vision. Again, with as much respect and moderation as I can muster here, I submit that it’s difficult not to recall Cary Nelson’s now infamous “Comp droids” slur, along with decades of disciplinary prejudice and elitism, in response to Bousquet’s blindness to and disregard for the will (and the work) of what I call the field’s “instructorate.” It’s not surprising in this respect that in his otherwise even-tempered response to Bousquet’s article, James Zebroski is so rankled by Bousquet’s “throwaway” (439) dig against teaching-intensive faculty and the teaching-centered institutions they often work at—“those very colleges that Bousquet somewhat dismissively notes in passing”—institutions Zebroski sees much rather as “the places where the action is” (438, 439). The action Zebroski’s imagining here, of course, is much more in the classroom than in the journals, and he urges us not to confuse the “disciplinary apparatus and its apparatchiks,” the work of the top elite of the field” visible “in the journals and in the conferences,” with “an approximation of either” “the discipline” or “the profession” (439). Though I know nothing about the rest of Bousquet’s professional life, his argument’s allegiances are clearly at most with “composition as professorial work,” as he puts it—if not, more simply, with professorial work in principle, separate from composition as a field (“A Discipline” 924; italics added). They do not seem to be with composition or, god forbid, with those who see their life’s work as teaching it to undergraduates.

This disregard for the field and those who work in it can perhaps be felt with even more immediate sting in the striking imbalance of Bousquet’s response to JAC readers, which acknowledges compositionist Joseph Harris’ letter only briefly and compositionist Peggy O’Neill’s not at all, but which lavishes attention on Evan Watkins, who like Bousquet himself, writes from the perspective of critical theory and has disciplinary roots in English. Is this some sort of oversight—could O’Neill’s letter have come in too late for Bousquet’s review and Harris’ too late for
careful inspection—or a simple, mean-spirited slap in the face, as if the responses of the field itself were simply unworthy of dignifying with serious consideration? I can’t help but think, recalling his dismissal of my article as a “proposal which is not one,” that Bousquet’s piece feels in this sense strikingly like a response which is not one—and revealing so (Bousquet 507).

It’s this same spirit of a self-appointed superior’s refusal to respond or acknowledge that animates the single line in Bousquet’s essay that I most object to: my article, he charges somewhat off-handedly, “legitimate[s] an already existing reality that few people are pleased with” (506). That few people are pleased with? I would acknowledge that there are relatively few full-time lecturers I’ve spoken to who have no reservations whatsoever about anything in their work lives—these are emerging positions, after all, almost always argued for against a measure of resistance from a variety of quarters, and thus positions that will need improving in the future in all sorts of ways. Some of these improvements we can imagine right now—like working out provisions for the sort of departmental and institutional representation, along with eligibility for the continuous employment, security of employment, and tenure arrangements that alone guarantee academic freedom—and some which I’m sure we can’t. (Indeed, Bousquet may be surprised to know that most lecturers find the phenomenon of bossing—whether being bossed or being thrust into bosswork—just as deprofessionalizing and anti-collegial as he does: representation in departmental and larger institutional governance is one of the key issues in lecturers’ discussions of their jobs.) But I also know a very large number of full-time lecturers who are thrilled to have their jobs and regard them as an infinitely preferable alternative to part-time work, as well as an even greater number of current part-timers (including many graduate students) who would be just as thrilled to have similar positions. They’re apparently just not people Bousquet counts as worth asking.5

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Notes

1. I’d also refer Bousquet to another footnote, which directly addresses something else he feels compelled to “point out” for me—as if I’d missed it—“that historically there have been plenty of ‘teaching intensive’ assistant professorships requiring little research and plenty of teaching, as in the community colleges and most liberal arts colleges” (504). This footnote also directly
answers Bousquet’s question about “why [I] now exclude nonresearch-oriented schools from [my] new recommendations” (521) (which, again, aren’t new at all, but identical to the ones in the original CCC article): “It should be clear that the model I propose will not be equally appropriate for all institutions. At teaching-oriented institutions—community colleges, many small liberal arts and professional colleges, and some state universities—the heavy teaching loads already carried by full-time faculty serve to make most faculty members regard themselves primarily as teachers and only secondarily, if at all, as researchers. These people already work as teaching-intensive faculty—and, in fact, might well be regarded as potential precedents for the kind of positions I am proposing here. As Robertson, Crowley, and Lentricchia pointed out way back in 1987, there is a grave danger in ‘attempt[ing] to provide generic solutions to unfair practices that vary widely from institution to institution’ (279)” (Murphy 39).

2. In fact, I should point out that Bousquet is not the only one to make this mistake: more than once, I have had to strain to make clear for well-meaning “defenders” of instructors’ rights from the professoriate that a call for tenurable instructorships does not mean a call for instructors to be converted to professors, with research-friendly teaching loads and sabbatical support. For many, there is an entirely automatic connection between “tenurability,” “research,” and “professorial” status.

3. I should note that this is not the AAUP position at the national level, but for a similar reaction from the professoriate, see the Chronicle of Higher Education’s report on the extension to tenure of teaching-only lecturers at Western Michigan, where one traditional faculty member equates the move with having “gutted the tenure system.”

4. I couldn’t help but note the irony of finding, on the day I drafted this section of this response, an AFT On Campus bulletin in my mailbox containing three stories on recent organizing or bargaining successes—two were part-time faculty units, and the other was a community college unit. And of course, despite Bousquet’s graduate student-centered vision of the faculty organizer, Workplace also carries reports of nontenure track organizing successes on a regular basis. There’s no question that graduate student attempts to organize in the last few years have been very inspiring, but we should be careful to note that organizing is by no means an exclusively graduate student phenomenon.

5. My apologies to Professor Bousquet and JAC readers for my long delay in response, which was due to circumstances out of my control. I am very grateful to Professor Worsham for agreeing to print a response so long after the publication of “Composition as a Management Science.”

Works Cited

Bousquet, Marc. “Composition as a Management Science: Toward a University without a WPA.” JAC 22 (2002): 654–75.


——. "New Faculty for a New University: Toward a Full-Time Teaching-Intensive Faculty Track in Composition and Rhetoric." *College Composition and Communication* 52 (2000): 14–42.

