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Contingent Librarianship and Precarity

Rethinking Library Practices as Managers and Leaders

Academic Library Workers in Conversation is a *C&RL News* series focused on elevating the everyday conversations of library professionals. The wisdom of the watercooler has long been heralded, but this series hopes to go further by minimizing barriers to traditional publishing with an accessible format. Each of the topics in the series was proposed by the authors, and the authors were given space to explore. This issue's conversation connects with the article in the September 2025 issue¹ and continues the exploration of contingent labor practices in libraries and precarity. This article explores how managers and leaders can better support workers. - *Dustin Fife, series editor*

Johanna M. Jacobsen Kiciman (JMJK): Hi folks, it is good to be in community with you to discuss a hard topic: contingent labor and job precarity in library work. I was in temporary positions for close to five years, and it took a huge toll on my work-life balance, my morale, my health, and my sense of belonging. I wanted to explore this as a group from a management and leadership perspective. What is our responsibility as managers to our colleagues who report to us when they are in a contingent labor role? How can we—or can we, in middle management—make these positions more ethical, more humanly sustainable?

Megan Watson (MW): I'm so glad to be engaging in this important conversation with you both! My own experience of temporary employment is a little different. I intentionally took on a term-limited role as a way to begin recovering from the burnout brought on by a decade in higher education. During that initial year, I had a job I could reasonably handle within a 40-hour week with none of the usual professional development and service expectations, and that proved enormously helpful in developing a more healthy and sustainable approach to work. That said, after my contract was extended again and again (and again), I took on more leadership responsibilities, and eventually I found myself unemployed waiting on a permanent search process; my thoughts on the ethics of my situation shifted. To your question about our responsibility as middle managers, Johanna, the word that comes immediately to mind is agency: where, when, and how can we empower contingent workers to set goals, determine priorities, develop relationships, and make the career decisions that are best for them, within this system that gives them

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(and us) so little control?

Dustin, what are your thoughts?

Dustin Fife (DF): Thanks for including me in this conversation. I think you both have already touched on key topics for building supportive positions. Johanna, I believe ethical is an incredibly important word here because I know we can build many contingent positions, but should we? Megan, the concept of agency is essential when we decide that we should. I'd love to hear more.

For me, the starting point is that we should not build contingent or temporary positions unless it is an intentional choice to do so that is beneficial to both the organization and the worker. A good example of this is a meaningful internship that provides both agency and early-career opportunities for folks still trying to figure out their long-term home in librarianship (not an internship filled with all the work that others don't want). I generally believe it is better to invest more resources in creating fewer equitable jobs, even if that means not creating a contingent position. For many, though, I think the reality of higher education makes us feel like we have to create these positions. Push back on that particular belief wherever possible!

And while recognizing reality, I want to plant a large, immutable flag here that says, "Just because libraries have always done it this way, does not mean we have to." Just because you had to start your career in a contingent position does not mean that others should. There are many inimical practices built into the system of librarianship, and we should seek change, not encourage others to "pay their dues."

Johanna, as you suggested, let's get ethical, ethical [read in the voice of Olivia Newton-John]. How do we create ethical contingent positions when necessary?

JMJK: First, I want to underscore your point, Dustin, that just because "we've always done it this way" doesn't mean it has to continue. Contingent labor in higher ed is frequently a budget or line-saving measure (let's keep the funds by hiring a placeholder until we get someone permanent). With that mindset, we often do not provide sufficient infrastructure or provide the same institutional investment. Does the contingent colleague get the same access to robust onboarding? To mentors? To professional development funds?

To answer your question, Dustin, we need to ensure that what we offer contingent colleagues centers *their* needs from a growth perspective ("What do *you* want to get out of this experience?") and that we do not fail someone by hiring them and then letting them flounder on their own without structural support. That is, quite frankly, abusive. I keep my own past precarity in mind and think about what I needed: clear communication and honesty. Megan, Dustin—these issues are bigger than the individual manager who may be well-intentioned.

DF: Exactly, Johanna. Do not let good intentions replace your commitment to ethical management. No one is a placeholder. All labor is skilled labor, and all workers deserve dignity. Hiring someone demands that you invest in them in the ways mentioned above. To me, this begins before day one.

If we do have these positions, Megan, what should we do as we write job descriptions and go through hiring processes?

MW: I really appreciate all of your points, Johanna and Dustin, particularly around considering and being critical of our intentions. It's important to carefully and realistically assess

the *impact* of our choices on those we decide to hire into contingent roles. And really, the first place for that reflection to occur is in the writing of job descriptions and job postings, which, depending on your institution, may be distinct things. Something I've seen more recently are postings that, in addition to the standard list of responsibilities and qualifications, explicitly address what the successful candidate will get out of the role.

For example, they detail what skills the worker will develop, what projects they'll work on and/or complete, and what initiatives they'll be participating in. What would it look like for us as managers to ask ourselves those questions? What would the answers be? This could help us both recognize and prepare for where we might need to develop more robust support for those incoming hires, but also, where it might not be appropriate to post the role at all. I mean, if the only outcomes we can come up with are things like "you will cover the desk" and "you will teach the overflow classes no one else has capacity to take," will that role actually benefit the worker, or are we veering into the territory of professional abuse that you mentioned, Johanna?

I think reflecting on and proactively providing specific outcomes will also lead to more rich, relational interview processes, where we can be forthright about what candidates can expect and have honest conversations about how that may or may not align with that candidate's professional goals. This starts to get to that agency and worker empowerment piece I brought up earlier, encouraging and entrusting candidates to consider and act according to their own needs. I wonder from your perspectives: Does that seem feasible? Are there institutional pieces that may be working against us here? And how might we build on this hiring approach within our actual management of contingent workers?

DF: You are asking all the right questions, Megan! And since we are looking at this from the management and leadership perspective, I think we should keep coming back to one point time and again. Should this contingent job even be created? I do not say that to make current contingent jobs even more precarious, the exact opposite, actually. Make it meaningful or get out of the contingent position business altogether. If you are currently reliant on contingent labor, work with those folks to ensure that it is meaningful and that they have the resources they need to be successful. While we do not always have more money to offer, we can work directly with folks to create supportive environments. Creating agency from the start is key to me. Asking ourselves, where are these future employees going to create meaning, and how are we going to empower that? Those are the questions, and that is the institutional mechanism from my perspective.

Johanna, what are your thoughts?

JMK: Megan, you asked about institutional barriers working against us, and Dustin, you offered curiosity around resources and meaning-making. (Takes a deep breath in). Libraries (administrators, HR) need to be scoping and right-sizing work for *everyone* so that middle managers have the bandwidth to support and nurture meaningful contingent labor. I have spoken elsewhere about mentorship models for graduate student workers that include values of growth, reflection, trust and transparency, collaboration, play, and yes—agency. The outcome of this sort of holistic support that sees a whole person is more intentional community, decreased burnout, and preparedness for early career challenges. Can we support contingent laborers with this sort of model? Can we reframe our thinking away from production (here's what we will *get* from or out of this labor) to *relationality* (here is a future colleague that I genuinely want to nurture a relationship with)? I realize I can be a bit Pollyanna-ish, but I

also think that moving librarianship away from hierarchical and possessive silos grounded in metrics and capitalism to a more integrated, relational, and holistically informed profession will have an impact.

This topic is not small, Dustin and Megan. We haven't touched on the affective experiences of a team when we cycle through colleagues, on the impact on sustainability (programs, services, etc.) within a library, or what contingent labor means for our patrons. Anything else rising to the surface for you all?

MW: You're correct, Johanna; this topic is not small. There is so much more to say and explore! From the questions you posed, I think the one that emerges to me is what contingent work means for the students, faculty, staff, and community members that use and rely on library services. We talk so much in libraries about our values, particularly around student-centered teaching and learning. If we think about our success in enacting those values as being primarily dependent on the strength of relationships we build with our patrons, it's clear to me that an overreliance on contingent employees is at odds with that approach.

Because those positions are precarious, the connections those workers are able to cultivate are precarious as well. Faculty and staff have a hard time engaging in robust collaborations with liaison librarians if they're not even sure who their liaison or contact is at any given time, and students are unable to benefit from a long-term relationship with someone who can partner with them throughout their college career. Again, I think we have to be extremely thoughtful about which positions we offer on a temporary basis and whether they serve the worker doing that labor *or* our overall goals as an organization.

Any final thoughts, Dustin?

DF: Thank you, Johanna and Megan. This conversation is so important.

Let's wrap up with a final, but important, caveat. No one has done anything wrong by accepting a contingent position or by working in a precarious profession. I think all three of us want to push libraries to think more holistically and to see the value that each library worker brings to the profession. We cannot build better if we are unwilling to recognize reality. I would ask everyone who works in libraries to think of the small things we can all do to support contingent folks as we work towards larger structural change. Think of the hours offered, the duties assigned, the travel expected, and more. Most change can happen without anyone's approval by recognizing the dignity of the folks with whom we work and creating space for them to make meaning, not just "cover the desk."

And, hopefully, it goes without saying, but even if your job happens to be contingent or precarious, you are not contingent or precarious. ♪

Note

1. Amanda Pirog and Arielle J. Rodriguez, "Contingent Librarianship and Precarity: Two Lived Perspectives," *C&RL News* 86, no. 8 (September 2025): 319-22, <https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.86.8.319>.