

# The Forum

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Your Albany Chapter Newsletter

Issue 145

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**By the Numbers:****COVID-19, as of May 13, 2020**

4.3	Millions of confirmed cases of COVID-19 Worldwide
1.52	Millions of those recovered from COVID-19 Worldwide
294	Thousands of those dead, worldwide from COVID-19
1.41	Millions of confirmed US cases of COVID-19
240	Thousands recovered in the US
84	Thousands of US deaths attributed to COVID-19
33	Millions of Americans who have filed for unemployment since COVID-19 lockdowns began
1	Billions of dollars publicly traded companies have received from stimulus ear-marked for small businesses
125	Millions of dollars returned to the federal government from large corporations
80	Estimated percentage of applicants without any funding
2	Millions, in annual salary, of executives on some of the companies receiving stimulus funds
750	Value in billions of dollars of a proposed federal bond buy back program

- 90            Number of fossil fuel companies, including Exxon, Chevron and Koch industries who would benefit from such a program

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## **UUP working for you:**

The current health care crisis has disrupted our working lives in ways that are still ongoing and whose implications and ramifications will be felt for months if not years to come. UUP has been working tirelessly, both at the chapter and at the statewide level, to ensure that the health and safety of our professional and academic faculty remain at the forefront of the decision-making process.

At the statewide level:

- We successfully negotiated a one-year blanket pause for the tenure clock of all academic faculty, without no change in rank, and an optional six-month extension of professionals' permanent appointment dates.
- We successfully negotiated a policy allowing all teaching faculty the option to exclude their spring 2020 teaching evaluations from their renewal, tenure and promotion reviews.
- We successfully negotiated a pilot Telecommuting Program—the first ever of its kind—that provides a negotiated framework for designated essential and non-essential employees to work from home during this health emergency.

- Our union has purchased and shipped hundreds of thousands of N95 masks and tens of thousands of surgical gowns to our members working in downstate SUNY teaching hospitals.
- We have been tireless advocates for federal support for public higher education to mitigate the financial impacts of this crisis, sending thousands of letters and making hundreds of phone calls to state and federal elected officials.

At the campus level:

- We moved quickly in the early days of the crisis, before the telecommuting policy had been negotiated, to get professional faculty off campus and working safely from home.
- We held multiple town hall forums updating members on new policies and procedures and addressing member questions and concerns.
- We are fighting to ensure that the Chapter is properly represented on the work groups of the Forward Together initiative.
- We have pushed for relaxed enrollment minimums on courses for the Fall, so that the University doesn't add to the ranks of the unemployed and uninsured by letting dozens of contingents go in the likely event that Fall enrollments are lower than usual.
- We are raising concerns about the push to maintain face-to-face teaching in the Fall. Given all we currently know about the virus and all we don't know, pressure to implement hybrid teaching seems irresponsible, potentially putting faculty in the untenable position of having to decide between their own health and safety and their continued employment at the University.

- We have advocated consistently for the best interests of our students—both their health and their education.
- On a daily basis, we continue to respond to concerns and questions about job security. Key to members advocating for themselves is understanding the importance of what type of appointment they have. Statewide has provided a thorough guide to assist members in understanding their rights under each type of appointment.
- And we have articulated a set of [solidarity principles](#) that we hope members can use to guide the decisions we will all likely have to confront in the coming wave of austerity we all anticipate.

In these and many other ways, we have tried to keep the working lives of our employees front and center as the University faces these uncertain times.

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### **[Pledge of Labor Solidarity for UAlbany Workers](#)**

#### **Issued by the Executive Committee of the UUP Albany Chapter**

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused enormous human suffering. First and foremost, it is a health crisis like no other in recent memory. Hundreds of thousands have already died of the disease, a figure that rises each day. We mourn with those around the world who have lost loved ones. Moreover, COVID-19 has prevented workers from working. More than 30 million people in the US have lost their jobs in a span of six weeks—a

figure also likely to rise—producing levels of economic disruption also unlike anything in recent memory.

The crisis we face at SUNY has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 health emergency, but not caused by it. Over the last decade our campus has struggled with austerity budgets and reduced staffing. To raise revenue the University has engaged in desperate efforts to attract and retain students to help offset a massive, decades-long public disinvestment from public higher education in New York State and across the country. The long-term solution to our current financial crisis can only be found in significant public reinvestment. In the short-term, budget cuts are likely. Though always painful, cuts can be managed in ways that are equitable, transparent, and humane.

Facing budget shortfalls, universities and colleges across the country have begun to impose salary reductions or, worse, to furlough or lay-off workers. We at SUNY are fortunate to have a strong union—United University Professions (UUP)—the benefits of which become crystal clear in moments of crisis and scarcity. We have a contract that provides considerable job security for many (though not all) of our members, and we have a statutory role in the process of shared governance. Our contract protects us from unilateral state reductions in salary or furloughs; such moves would have to be negotiated with the union. These contractual provisions, however, as strong as they are, cannot shield us entirely from the economic turmoil we are likely to face. The contract will not answer the complex questions of campus priorities that will shape our budgeting decisions; it merely provides a framework within which the deliberations occur. At the campus level it will take engaged participation from UUP members to meet the economic challenges ahead.

In the face of likely cuts, UUP members will be tasked over the coming months, in ways both large and small, to participate in the difficult process

of balancing campus budgets. When engaging in this process—whether at the university-wide level, or in our smaller units—we, the Executive Committee of the Albany UUP Chapter, ask members to be guided by the principles of labor solidarity, which accord fully, we believe, with the core mission of the University.

*By signing this statement, the undersigned UUP members pledge that any decisions and actions we undertake to manage anticipated cuts will, to the best of our ability, be made in accordance with the following principles:*

1. **No job losses:** The University's employees are its most important resource. Protecting jobs minimizes the human suffering to employees. Moreover, it maintains the foundation of the University: its capacities to teach and provide services for students, along with the institution's role in the preservation and creation of knowledge.
2. **No loss of healthcare:** Healthcare in the US remains tied to employment. In the face of a global pandemic, we must do everything possible to prevent the loss of health benefits from employees. This means not only keeping people employed, but particularly for contingent faculty, keeping them employed at levels that maintain their health coverage.
3. **Equitable budgeting:** Cuts should be distributed broadly across the campus. This is not a time to "build to strength," or foster cut-throat competition among units for scarce resources. Our University's strength is in the diversity of its programs; small units must be maintained alongside larger ones. Whether as the result of swift retrenchment or slow attrition, the loss of programs and units must be avoided at all costs.
4. **Protect the most vulnerable:** Equitable does not mean identical. Cuts should come first from those segments of the university community

that are most able to withstand the losses. We should take special care to ensure the security of those who have the weakest job protections, the lowest salaries, and the most tenuous access to health benefits.

5. **Transparent processes:** The processes through which decisions are made, and the data on which they are based must be entirely transparent. Most pressingly, this means making complete, itemized university budgets public. Any data on enrollments, revenues, growth or other relevant criteria must likewise be public. Only with full information and transparent procedures can academic and professional faculty meaningfully participate in determining budgetary priorities.

6. **Shared governance:** UUP and the University Senate act as the two primary bodies of shared governance on our campus. In times of crisis, it is incumbent that the University work with and through these bodies. Full consultation, not the expectation of a rubber-stamp, is the only genuinely participatory process. Academic and professional faculty must participate in planning and decision-making bodies (i.e., committees, task forces, etc.) process as co-equal partners with the campus administration, drawing upon the collective expertise of the campus. When the University says, “we’re all in this together,” it must live up to its word.

[Click here to add your signature:](#)

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## **Reflections on 2010: Lessons for the Present Crisis**

**Bret Benjamin, Jim Collins, and Cynthia Fox**

In 2010, faced with substantial budget deficits in the wake of the financial crisis, UAlbany attempted to balance its books through a series of cutbacks, the most spectacular and destructive of which was its decision to deactivate degree programs in French, Russian, Italian, Theater, and Classics. Less visible than the deactivations, but no less devastating, was the structural realignment that took place with non-renewals of untenured employees, positions left unfilled, an increased reliance on contingent faculty, and sustained erosion of many units on campus. The process exposed the administration's willingness to use a financial crisis as an opportunity to remake the university according to its own priorities, while significantly weakening UAlbany's standing as a comprehensive public research university. As part of our struggle to oppose the university cuts and to articulate an affirmative vision of public higher education's social value, Bret Benjamin, Jim Collins, and Cynthia Fox each committed time and energy to strengthening campus faculty governance institutions. Bret became UUP Chapter President. Jim served as both Chapter President and University Senate Chair. And Cynthia served as a UUP delegate and as Senate Chair. Now, as we again face the likelihood of austerity budgets, we have put together the following reflections on our present crisis with an eye to lessons we learned from 2010.

**The erosion of shared governance.** Looking at the evolution of higher education over the past few decades it is easy to see the forces that have undermined robust institutions of shared governance. Faced with shrinking public funding, universities balanced budgets with cheap contingent labor, eroding the base and power of tenured academic and professional faculty members. Over the same period, a cohort of career-administrators arose,

divorced from a sustained relationship to the university and its faculty. With an eroded tenured faculty, and increased demands for productivity, faculty service became increasingly devalued even as bureaucratic busywork intensified. This has led to the lamentable situation in which governance bodies find themselves in a largely reactive mode, responding to policies or initiatives only after they are fully formed, and with their participation restricted to a vote of yay or nay. The erosion of governance has led in turn to the pervasive sense that nothing faculty do will make any significant difference, a cynicism that snowballs into still less faculty participation, further eroding governance structures.

**Substantive Participation.** Moments of crisis reveal how essential it is that strong shared governance bodies assert their rights to participate fully and equally in the development of analyses, priorities, and solutions. In the wake of the 2010 crisis, we tried to build a stronger Senate and a stronger Union chapter. Those bodies and others will now face a test. *Faculty must assert their authority to be equal participants in those decisions that will most directly affect their work-lives, and about which they have considerable expertise.* When presented with fully formed plans that appear immutable, we must insist upon our right to slow things down, to define the principles upon which decisions are to be made, to deliberate about the merits of proposals, and to participate in crafting stronger policies and programs. Perhaps the first real test of this principle will come with the question of when and how to reopen the campus. Academic and professional faculty must be co-participants in making this decision, since our health and safety (along with the health of our students and their close communities) will be directly at risk.

**Faculty have uneven capacities and cuts will have uneven effects.** Job protections and institutional clout vary enormously on our campus. Likewise, the effects of budget cuts will inevitably affect some much more than others. We can predict many of these asymmetries in advance.

Tenured faculty need to do what they can to protect untenured and contingent faculty and those who, for a range of other reasons, may be more vulnerable. Bigger programs with greater institutional stability need to do what they can to help protect smaller, less secure programs. *We need to create venues through which principles can be developed that advance the shared and common interests of all of us, with a particular eye to those who are most vulnerable.*

**This is why you have tenure!** Those of us who are fortunate enough to have the employment security that comes with tenure have a particular responsibility in moments of crisis to act in accordance with our own principles, and with an eye to the interests of those who lack the job protections that make possible full participation. Tenure allows us to voice ideas that are critical of our employers. *If tenured faculty cannot be mobilized to fight for a principled vision of a university in a moment of crisis, then no one else will either.*

**The Contract and the governance by-laws are necessary, but insufficient.** Looking at the furloughs, layoffs and closures of other higher-ed institutions across the country makes plain how fortunate we are to have the protections and platforms afforded by a union and faculty governance. That said, their mere existence will not be sufficient to protect us from cuts. In 2010, rather than retrenchments (which must follow a strict, clearly stipulated contractual process) the University pursued program deactivations, coercing faculty into leaving based on threats to their own jobs and those of more junior colleagues. The union was able to advocate for individual members, but it was not able to prevent the university from forcing out tenured colleagues. Likewise, the Senate had provisions that required full and formal consultation and approval for any significant programmatic decisions, but the University was able to claim that mere notification satisfied the requirement for consultation. The Senate, to its credit has, since 2010, insisted on the

principle of formal consultation and fought for that principle in various University initiatives, but it remains an uphill battle. The Contract and the various University by-laws provide us with tools. *But it will be up to the faculty as a whole to fight for the vision of public higher education that we want to uphold, and to struggle over the particular mechanisms and processes that will be used to manage the austerity budgets we are likely to face.*

**We cannot cede the language of transparency and participation to the university.** To provide cover for its 2010 cuts, the University used a familiar series of mechanisms to produce the illusion of transparency and faculty participation. Budget Advisory Groups (BAGs) were established with hand-picked representatives to review scenarios and make recommendations. Even had these committees been inclined to resist administrative decisions, members were provided only with schematic budgets and heavily massaged data. The recently announced UAlbany Forward Together committees raise similar concerns. The composition of these groups seems very light on academic and professional faculty, and lighter still on both union and Senate representatives. We fear that these bodies may provide the appearance of transparency without its substance. We would all do well to remember one of the founding UUP principles: that faculty should not take part in processes that lead to the loss of jobs for fellow members. This can be difficult in practice, but the principle can help orient our involvement. We advocate faculty participation, then, but participation with eyes wide open. *Most important, we must be absolutely clear about our definitions of participation and transparency: we mean full and equal participation, with unfettered access to comprehensive information.* Without this framework, we run the risk that our participation can be used against us.

**Full information is essential.** Budgets reflect deep institutional priorities. Without access to full and complete budgeting data, faculty lack

the necessary tools to participate meaningfully. In 2010 faculty were provided with only the most skeletal data and asked to agree to cuts based on assurances from the university that there was no alternative. *Complete, itemized university budgets must be public and open to faculty scrutiny. Faculty members must likewise have full access to the "Business Intelligence" database to track data on enrollments, revenues, expenditures, employment trends, and other pertinent information.* The big picture is often hidden from individual faculty, working in their smaller units. Learning to consider the university as a whole and acting in the interest of the common good are skills that we must cultivate together.

**Competition is corrosive and demoralizing.** Faculty are often pitted against each other in moments of scarcity. We act with a siege mentality, desperately holding onto whatever scraps we can. This is understandable, but ultimately self-defeating. We cannot find ourselves in the position of justifying our own existence by undercutting colleagues—citing figures, for example, to demonstrate that another department has even lower enrollments or receives even less grant funding, or that another colleague or unit is more expendable. An injury to one is an injury to all. *Solidarity is the only effective response to corrosive competition.*

**Faculty mobilization matters.** In 2010 the Senate and the Union both found themselves reacting to events. Both bodies, understandably, scrambled to keep up with the flood of particular problems and issues that swirled around the budget crisis. Such detail-oriented engagement is an essential part of the work that both institutions do. Procedural details matter. Individual cases matter. Both the Senate and the Union have historically been quite good at this work. However, it is imperative that both institutions also keep their eyes on the big picture. If (when?) faculty participation doesn't take place on equal terms and with full transparency, faculty need to be ready to assert agency through other means. Governance bodies must prepare for and facilitate this mobilization. They

must make it a priority to communicate, to educate, and to organize mechanisms through which faculty voices can reassert their expertise and their responsibility for the curricular and operational decisions of the university. *When Senate and UUP provide clear guidance that emerges out of a process of engaged member participation, we are best able to act collectively with unity and with power.* This is an enormous task, but it is an essential one. *Senate and UUP need to work together in this and need to find ways of dividing labor among many participants to help broaden and deepen their institutional capacity as we face this new crisis.*

**Coalitions make us stronger.** The first phase in readying for cuts is to prepare faculty to play an active role in determining the future of the university. But faculty acting alone will be unsuccessful over the long haul. We must establish coalitions with other SUNY campuses, other unions, higher-ed organizing groups at other schools, and especially with students, parents, and community members who share a vision of public higher education. The Save Our SUNY coalition and its offshoot, New York Students Rising (NYSR) that emerged in response to the 2010 cuts were crucial actors in the response to campus cuts and, later in articulating demands to State government about funding SUNY. Such efforts will need to be rebuilt and expanded.

**Advocate for more public higher-ed funding.** In the short term our job will be to manage the coming cuts as equitably and humanely as possible. In the long-term we must commit to advocating for greater State and Federal funding. Administrators will inevitably shape their vision of a university according to the dictates of profitability and “consumer” demand, shrouded in the language of innovation. By contrast, we must advocate for a vision of the university defined by principles of common social good, the intrinsic value of education, and the insistence that a rigorous, comprehensive university education be accessible to all students who wish to study.

## **Unprecedented Circumstances, Predictable Outcomes**

**Aaron Major**

Unprecedented. That is the word that we have come to rely on to help us make sense of the scope and scale of the COVID-19 health emergency. Acknowledging that we are in a truly unique moment can be helpful when it primes us to take extraordinary action to look after the health and well-being of family, friends and strangers alike. But stressing the unique, unprecedented character of this current moment removes its causes and effects from historical and social context. It can help us act quickly and creatively, but it will also cause us to fail to address the underlying sources of our vulnerability so that we emerge physically healed but living even-more precarious lives in even-more fragile institutions.

Furloughs and layoffs, program cuts and campus closures--news of colleges and universities taking tough measures to deal with budget shortfalls come at us more quickly than we can keep up with. But this is essentially the same parade of higher education new stories that we've been seeing for the last few years as many small colleges, including Marlboro College in Vermont and Newbury College in Massachusetts, have closed their doors. Large public University systems (Wisconsin, Vermont) are considering closing, or consolidating campuses, and many have already cut programs and reduced faculty and staff in response to significant budget shortfalls. Our own campus, in 2010, deactivated several academic programs in the arts and humanities in the immediate aftermath of the Great Recession and continues to struggle with persistent budget deficits.

The point, here, is not to downplay the significance of this current moment. There can be no doubt that the impacts of this global health pandemic will cut deeper, be felt more broadly, and stay with us longer than any other event in recent memory. The point rather is to show that

our use of terms like “unprecedented” and “unforeseen” leads us to misunderstand how and why we have become so vulnerable to the economic impacts of our COVID-19 response. It is not the pandemic that will force us to come to terms with austerity budgeting; more than a decade of austerity budgeting has left us ill-prepared to confront the challenges of COVID-19.

### **Austerity and vulnerability.**

When we talk about austerity budgeting in public higher education we have to start with one basic fact: in the wake of the Great Recession of 2008 states disinvested from their public university systems and shifted the cost of running public colleges

and universities onto students, accelerating a process that had been ongoing for decades. I think it is fair to say that most of us know this. What we have not fully appreciated until this moment of crisis are the consequences of this burden-shifting, particularly as it relates to our ability to face the social and economic challenges that the COVID-19 health emergency has put in front of us.

As public university financing has shifted onto the backs of students it has caused public colleges and universities to function less like public institutions and more like private corporations. Student dollars for tuition, fees and room and board are now the life-blood of ostensibly public campuses. No wonder students are often understood as consumers: the financial health of the public education system depends, primarily, on their money.

As a strategy for financing a university, the tuition-based model assumes that you can count on a steadily increasing supply of paying students. Unfortunately, the shift to tuition-based financing of public colleges and

universities came at a time when enrollments across the country stopped growing, often for straight-forward demographic reasons. What this has meant is that every college and university campus is trying to claim a bigger share of a shrinking pool of students. This, in turn, has created an inter-campus competition for tuition-bearing bodies, leading colleges and universities to devote more of their energy into marketing and branding campaigns while chasing “cutting edge” career trends through programmatic innovation.

Demographic realities have proven to be stubborn. Despite our best efforts, the surge of new students never materialized, leaving our campus--like so many around the country--stuck in this same bind: strapped for resources. All of that innovating, expanding and marketing now comes at the expense of our less glamorous and unmarketable core operations and mission. We’ve been giving the rooms in our house a fresh coat of paint while watching the cracks in the foundation grow.

Years of austerity have not only hollowed out our underlying infrastructure and weakened our operational capacity, however; it has also undermined our ability to work and act collectively in the service of a shared mission. Each unit on campus now has to justify its worth through the metrics of the market. Programs seemingly have no intrinsic worth; they are only worth the number of students that they can bring into the classroom. Given stagnant enrollments growing one major can only come at the expense of other programs on campus. We are grateful for the chance to compete with each other for small amounts of “strategic” resources and, as a result, learn how much, or how little, our institution values our contributions.

The institutional response that the COVID-19 crisis demands, though, is precisely the opposite of what austerity has bred into our public colleges and universities. As illness and death have swept across the world, we see

that when life is put on pause being “nimble” and “efficient” is not just useless, it is counterproductive. For years we have heeded the calls of “all hands on deck” to deal with the erosion of our University, as it has operated on the razor-thin margins of just-in-time efficiency brought on by years of austerity. That is why in this moment of real crisis there is no fat to trim, no buffer to absorb the shock, nothing left for us to give. As public health experts call on us to act in a solidaristic, collective manner in order to reduce the virus’s human toll we begin to understand the real cost of the individualistic, competitive stance that austerity has forced universities such as ours to adopt.

### **Recovering from austerity.**

A novel virus has brought us a global health emergency; years of austerity have turned this health crisis into a social and economic crisis. If we can recognize this, then we should also be able to recognize that following austerity’s playbook will not save us.

What does this mean, concretely? First, and perhaps most obviously, it means that we can not keep following this same tuition-based funding model for our public colleges and universities. It was unsustainable before; it is accelerating and deepening the damage done by COVID-19 now. In a global health pandemic, whose end-date is as yet unknown, we are betting the future of public higher education on students’ enrollment decisions in the months to come. Students will have good reason to stay away from college campuses, or may lack the financial resources to pay for an ever-more-expensive college education. The fundamental irrationality of treating our students like customers and our public colleges and universities like retail outlets is laid bare.

Second, we need to shed ourselves of the baggage that has come with over a decade of austerity in public higher education. Reinvesting in public education will take concerted pressure on political leaders and it will take

time. As we fight that fight, we simultaneously need to not just resist the further encroachment of austerity's competitive, individualistic logic into our university, but actively replace it with one that is collaborative and solidaristic.

Signing, and more importantly, having a conversation with our colleagues about, [the Pledge of Labor Solidarity](#) that our Chapter Executive Board endorsed is an important step in this direction. We, as individual higher education professionals and as an institution of higher education, need to recover a vocabulary of solidarity and collaboration; we hope this document helps us do that.

But this is only one step. It is not enough to commit to a set of values. We must also act on them, and that requires reasserting the role of shared governance in the administration of the university and using those spaces—UUP, the University Senate—to reclaim the core mission and the core values of public higher education. It will not make us more nimble or innovative, but it might leave us with something worth building on, whenever we find ourselves on the other side of this crisis.

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## **A Contingent's Worth**

**Anne M. Woulfe, Officer for Contingents**

Now that we are living with dramatic uncertainties brought about by COVID-19, the reality of austerity is upon us. Allow me to state the obvious: almost every person on the globe is impacted in some way by this pandemic. So why talk about academic contingents at a time like this? Quite simply, it is because we are here. It is because we are an integral part of the University community and the academic experience. COVID-19 continues to take a toll on every aspect of life, but there are some

fundamental steps that can be taken to lessen the impact of this crisis. I hope this article will serve as a reminder that contingent faculty are vital to this institution. Also, I hope that retention strategies for contingent faculty be considered as cost-saving initiatives. Retention of qualified, dedicated faculty, despite rank or title, may prove more cost-effective than continually hiring and training new faculty.

Let me be clear, I am no expert on budgeting or financial planning. However, I know that equitable standards applied to all sectors of employment go a long way in preventing long-term financial loss. It is logical to assume that if academic departments and administrative offices implement cost-effective measures related to retaining faculty, the savings would be greater than what may be measured in dollars and cents. We know that the retention of students is important to any academic institution. Retention of qualified, committed faculty should also be a priority for institutions where higher learning is paramount.

Of course, not all contingents are created equal. This became evident last fall with the unveiling of the Career Path for Full Time Lecturers initiative here at UAlbany. As stated in the title, part-time lecturers were not included in this endeavor. This was disappointing because in 2015 a Blue Ribbon Panel was convened to study part-time faculty concerns. The Report of the Panel on Part-Time and Contingent Faculty and Staff recommended the following; job security, a living wage, and advancement opportunities for all contingent faculty members. The exclusion of part-time faculty from measures offering job security for full-time contingents sends a message: our work here is not valued. Whether this message is intended or not, the impact is the same. This has been true for decades, and it remains true today.

Last October, the theme of UUP's nationwide Campus Equity Week initiative was *The Gig Is Up*. This was to highlight the reality that so many

contingent faculty members are forced to seek additional employment to make ends meet. While “gigging” may be popular for people who want to explore their creativity and earn a few extra bucks, it should not be a necessity for college faculty. Part-time contingent employees are always looking for better opportunities at other institutions, or we are denied full-time non-teaching positions because we are over-qualified (many contingents have doctoral degrees). It is exhausting to work while simultaneously scanning every available avenue for something that may offer just a bit more financial security.

Every contingent faculty member deserves fair pay, job security, and opportunities to move forward based on performance. Simply having confirmation that we will be employed beyond the end of any given semester would be a great place to start. A “one and done” mentality prevents contingents from finding a place among and across academic departments. This makes it difficult to connect with other faculty members, and fragments or even flattens our professional development. A contract that offers contingents a two- or three-year guarantee of employment is not too much to ask, particularly for people who have already been teaching on campus for years. Longer contracts would strengthen the campus community by fostering inclusion and cohesion among all faculty members.

There is also the question of unemployment insurance. Wondering what the immediate future (the upcoming semester) will hold pushes contingent faculty to access any and all available resources, including seeking unemployment insurance. As a colleague from SUNY Cortland reminded participants on a recent webinar, unemployment insurance is an earned benefit for anyone who has contributed by paying taxes. What happens when applications for unemployment insurance are filed *en masse*? How much does that cost the university? Why add to the already overwhelmed

system when it could easily be avoided while simultaneously protecting jobs and maintaining campus stability?

Other SUNY schools have taken major steps toward securing part-time contingent faculty jobs and providing pathways to full-time jobs by negotiating agreements. Notably, SUNY Oneonta and SUNY Cortland have adopted mechanisms for part-time faculty members to work toward a career path that will likely reduce job insecurity while providing upward mobility. These paths to greater stability and job security are good not only for contingent faculty, they also help ensure greater stability for the campus community. This is because contingent faculty members also counsel, mentor, and provide academic and social support to students outside of the classroom. We are not robots. We develop rapport with students and they often seek our advice and counsel during and after the semester.

Full-time and part-time contingent professors here at UAlbany make up a significant portion of the teaching faculty. Many of us have been here for years, even decades. We stay because we understand the value of our work. We know what we are worth to students and the university. Yet, we are not satisfied with the status quo.

The solution is simple and overdue. Offer all contingent faculty the following: secure employment, a living wage that is equitable across departments and disciplines, manageable class sizes, opportunities for advancement, and inclusion in departmental decisions that directly impact our experiences. Contingent faculty would benefit from these guarantees, the University would benefit by avoiding costly employee searches, and students would benefit from the provision of continuity and heightened campus stability.

In other words, we should work to improve upon retention efforts to avoid additional institutional costs, both monetary and professional. As we look forward to the post COVID-19 era, we should be proud of how many jobs were not sacrificed, how many lives were not disrupted, and how the University demonstrated its appreciation for all faculty.

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## **What Universities can Learn about Disaster Capitalism from Hurricane Katrina**

**Loretta Pyles**

It was May 2005 when I graduated with my PhD from the University of Kansas. Always one for efficiency, I got married and hooded on the same weekend. Later that summer, Ted and I headed out to start academic positions in New Orleans. Me, as a tenure-track faculty in social work at Tulane University and he, as an adjunct faculty in philosophy, slated to teach 2 courses at Tulane and 2 at Loyola University of New Orleans. We bought a house in a neighborhood not far from campus (a neighborhood we later learned had been a swamp 50 years earlier) and innocently drove south from Lawrence, Kansas. In late August, just six weeks after arriving, we were stunned to find ourselves evacuating in anticipation of a very large hurricane in the Gulf of Mexico, called hurricane Katrina, that would hit the Gulf Coast on August 29, 2005.

Eventually making our way back to Lawrence as we learned of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' levee failures, we watched with horror as everything went to hell. There was death, destruction, displacement; a devastated regional landscape and economy. Our neighborhood had 6 feet of water in it; our new home flooded. The fall semester was cancelled. What was even more shocking though was the disaster after the disaster.

What follows is an account of some of the post-disaster dynamics that played out in New Orleans with a special focus on what happened at universities in terms of austerities, disaster capitalism, and shock doctrines. Can colleges and universities learn lessons from Katrina as we face COVID-19 and [the likely future fallouts that will transpire](#)? I hope so. While the crises are certainly different in many respects, they share enough similarities to be worthy of comparison. Still on the heels of the 2008 recession, universities are even more vulnerable than they were in 2005, so the stakes are high.

I write this as a scholar and a unionist who looks to bring a structural analysis to what transpired with attention to the social narratives that perpetuate the same old winners and losers. To be sure, there were, and are now, many well-intentioned leaders who are often doing the best that they can with what they know in a time when so much is unknown and when quick decisions are demanded. However, when we think structurally, it opens up an opportunity to do better going forward and educate one another and our leaders about what we need to pay attention to and take action on.

### *Paradoxes Abound: Solidarity and Shock Doctrines*

As with all disasters, there was solidarity in the Gulf Coast that was both practically helpful in terms of mutual aid and psychologically beneficial in the sense of cultivating belonging and support, what Rebecca Solnit has referred to as ["a paradise built in hell."](#) This liminal space felt fertile and opened up a window of hope for transformative change in a place with a long legacy of oppression.

As the intersections of economic, racial, and [gendered disparities](#) were made even more grossly apparent through the visible indignities of shelters

of last resort and forced evacuations, and [the less visible subsequent rebuilding and recovery process](#), there was also a plethora of rich and courageous conversations and actions about structural poverty and racial reconciliation. There were cultural celebrations that bolstered resilience, neighborhood recovery movements, and direct action resistance to [neoliberal, top-down approaches to recovery](#). While there was some healing that transpired in that small window of time, the politics of crisis and disasters sadly would win the day.

*Structural divides and disparities will be exacerbated during and after a crisis*

Disaster researchers have noted that already marginalized people and communities are at-risk of suffering a downward spiral after a disaster. Examples abounded in the Katrina context. The 3 Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in New Orleans [suffered disproportionately](#) as a result of Katrina and post-disaster policymaking. This included the public Southern University of New Orleans (SUNO) and the 2 private schools, Dillard University and Xavier University of New Orleans. With their campuses built on lower lying real estate they were much harder hit in terms of the physical damage to the campus and waited for many years to receive recovery funds. They had smaller endowments to absorb the hit and SUNO has never fully recovered.

After the disaster, with neoliberal disaster capitalism on full display, public housing, public schools, and public hospitals in New Orleans were [dismantled](#) in favor of privatized solutions. Recovery programs such as the Road Home housing program were privatized. In the midst of disasters, the public can feel confused and disoriented and thus [shock doctrines](#) are unleashed which enable developers, profiteers, and non-profteers to seize control in ways that further marginalize people who were already vulnerable. As the British banker and politician, Baron Rothschild, said in

the 18th century, "the time to buy is when there's blood in the streets." The messaging around these actions -- "it was time to clean up public housing anyway," and "these schools were already failing" -- conspired to make them amenable to the general public. The impacts that these policies have had on low-income families of color and other marginalized people has been nothing short of devastating.

In response to the disaster, Tulane laid off about 2,000 part-time employees in September and October 2005 and 243 non-teaching personnel in November 2005. On December 8, 2005, Tulane University [declared a state of financial exigency](#) and the next day around 200 or so faculty members, mostly adjunct faculty, were fired including 58 tenured faculty; they laid off another 200 employees in January 2006. The university eliminated 6 undergraduate and graduate programs and dissolved Newcomb College, a women's college established by Josephine Louise Newcomb whose family eventually sued Tulane (and lost) to enforce their ancestor's intent of the gift. Several universities engaged in similar firings and retrenchments in the region and would eventually be censured by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) for actions related to the post-Katrina crisis.

In their censure of Tulane, AAUP based their decision on the fact that the university did [not provide evidence of financial exigency](#) and noted that they declined to provide reasons for selecting particular programs and faculty appointments for termination, declined to seek relocation of released professors in other suitable positions, and made no distinction between tenured and non-tenured faculty.

Cuts were announced from charismatic leaders and almost always framed in the name of sacrifice for a larger cause in the face of tremendous suffering. While it is painful to know that even tenure is not safe, the fact that some of the more marginalized at a university, lower wage workers,

adjunct faculty and women students, were victims of these cuts, is not surprising.

### *Disaster Capitalism as Contracts, Partnerships, and Innovation*

One of the hallmarks of disaster capitalism is recovering from the crisis through the use of no-bid contracts, behind the scenes deals, and other actions framed as partnerships and innovations. A few examples from the hurricane Katrina context can serve to illustrate. As Tulane rebuilt part of their campus and medical school, one of the contractors involved in this rebuilding, Belfor USA Group, Inc., a major natural disaster reconstruction firm, was eventually [sued in a class action suit](#) for violating the Fair Labor Standards Act in relation to its hiring of laborers (primarily vulnerable immigrants), illegally using a sub-contractor system to avoid paying overtime wages. These workers often worked 12-hour days, seven days a week, removing debris and mold. Fortunately, the case was settled and all unpaid wages were paid with penalties.

In the aftermath of the hurricane, seven thousand [New Orleans school teachers, mostly African American women, were fired](#), a majority African American elected board was replaced by a white-majority board, [the South's largest local union](#) was dismantled, and market-based school reforms were implemented throughout the region primarily in the form of charter schools. Marketed as an innovative approach to teaching, Teach for America and other programs [recruited inexperienced, mostly white college graduate to replace unionized, often African-American teachers](#).

Scrambling to ensure the re-opening of the university in the spring semester, Tulane went behind the scenes and created an agreement with a local public school that prior to Katrina had educated primarily African American children in New Orleans. Tulane thus ended up being a major player in dismantling the struggling public school system in New Orleans,

chartering the Lusher Schools, a K-12 “partnership” that would guarantee places for the children of Tulane faculty and staff. They created research partnerships and institutes that focused on this grand experiment which is now considered [the most comprehensive school privatization in the country](#).

In the post-disaster setting, New Orleans also quickly became rich ground for community service, service learning, and alternative spring breaks as young people from all over the country descended on the Gulf Coast. While the call to service is a noble one and is very common during and after a disaster, when done without attention to the impact this can have on local resources, racial and class dynamics, housing and rental prices, and local culture, it can do more harm than good. This disaster service work happened to coincide with the rising tide of the university-community partnership movement and triggered an increase in student applications to Tulane, actually creating a windfall for the already privileged university in terms of students, research dollars, and other partnerships. This phenomenon not only created unintended consequences in communities wherein class divides were exacerbated, but it diverted resources from other struggling universities and community organizations with less resources.

### *The Ideas Lying Around*

The economist Milton Friedman said:

“Only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on *the ideas that are lying around*. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes the politically inevitable.” (italics added for emphasis)

One of the lessons learned in disasters is that crisis policy making reflects pre-existing agendas. The developers in New Orleans had their eyes on the prime real estate on which public housing sat for a very long time, including near the French Quarter. By 2007, the New Orleans City Council unanimously voted 7-0 to demolish 4,500 HUD units including the B.W. Cooper, St. Bernard, Lafitte and C.J.Peete housing projects. *The Nation* writer, [Roberta Brandes Gratz](#) recalled: "Hundreds of people showed up at City Hall hoping to testify, but many were locked out, their protests met with pepper spray and Tasers. The scene was reminiscent of a Third World uprising, brutally put down."

Whether it is privatizing public schools and re-developing low-income housing in the community or cutting programs at a university, the ideas lying around are what we should be most afraid of.

### *The Road Ahead*

We persevered and rebuilt. Ted and I found a rental apartment for the spring 2006 semester and I finally began my academic career. Ted lost both of his jobs as a philosophy adjunct and fell back on his skills as a carpenter as he spent the semester rebuilding our house. This was certainly a weird way to start an academic career, but I was thankful that I was paid for the fall 2005 semester even though I wasn't teaching. And Ted would eventually re-claim an adjunct position at Tulane.

One of the things I learned during my time in New Orleans was that our empathy for others, love of heroes, and lack of ability to see through bewitching narratives will lead us to ignore injustice and turn a blind eye to policies not in our collective best interests. I learned too that strong leadership is critical in times of crisis. But, this doesn't necessarily mean

just taking control of the situation. It means that humanity and solidarity with the most marginalized have to be centered.

In this moment in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is easy to see abundant examples of good leadership, care work and compassion all around, including at our own university. But, we must be cautious. The recently announced hiring and spending freezes could be just the tip of the iceberg. We already know what some of the ideas lying around universities are: entrepreneurialism through internal and external grant competitions, online learning, profitable public/private partnerships, market driven innovations and a host of efficiencies including program cuts, mergers, and other retrenchments. AAUP expressed concern with the lack of meaningful faculty involvement in the decisions made after Katrina. Let's not let a lack of meaningful involvement be a concern here as well. I am thankful to be part of a union that has the capacity to stand in solidarity, resist damaging policies, and to offer a human-centered strategy going forward.

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## **Notes on the current crisis**

### **Paul Stasi**

Moments of crisis are often moments of clarity, that allow us insight into elements of our social order that remain veiled in our ordinary lives. I offer here, a few thoughts about what this current crisis, and our relatively disorganized response to it, has shown us.

1) The pandemic has laid bare some basic inequalities in our society. The first, and most obvious, concerns class. Think about the idea of essential workers. Who counts as essential? Grocery store workers, delivery people, gas station attendants, Amazon warehouse employees, nurses and hospital

technicians. On our campus, the custodial staff. None of these are highly paid positions and yet they are essential to the basic needs we require. So, they have had to risk exposure to the virus so that those of us with the luxury to stay at home can.

2) The virus also has well documented racial disparities. But, as we know, race is a biological fiction so the racial disparities in health must themselves be social. Structural racism keeps a significant percentage of racialized subjects in poverty. Poverty, in turn, creates a set of social conditions that make people vulnerable to the virus.

3) We see, clearly, the bankruptcy of a health insurance system tied to employment. Consider the basic insanity of the current position: your health care comes from your job; a health crisis fires you from your job; so now you have no health care in a pandemic. This is clearly untenable.

4) Relatedly, the next time someone says “there isn’t money for that” remind them that a Republican controlled Senate found trillions of dollars immediately to produce an economic stimulus. There are many things we can say about this stimulus—in my view, it was tilted towards corporations rather than people while the one-time payment is woefully inadequate to help those who are struggling—but the fact is the money was found when it was deemed necessary. We have money. The question is really just about how we spend it. Whom will it benefit? This is fundamentally a political question.

5) The United States has a long history of debate about the relationship between states and the federal government. Similarly, it has a long history of populist distrust of experts – often pejoratively called “elites.” Suspicion of science and suspicion of the federal government are working hand-in-hand, producing a particularly toxic leadership vacuum at the federal level. Clearly what is needed at a moment such as this are evidence-based

policies that can be implemented across the entire county. If some states open up and others don't, we will not contain the virus. We can observe here how helpful it would be if the federal government could coordinate things – sending ventilators and masks where they are needed, sending food that farmers in agricultural areas are letting go waste to places where people are starving. But our federal government, after decades of cut-backs, is unable—and also, at the current moment, unwilling—to do these things.

6) Finally there is a nonsensical debate going on right now about saving the economy versus saving people's lives. Yes, everyone needs a job, under the regime of wage labor, to purchase goods, which means that employment is tied to health and well-being. But the economy is not something that is a good in and of itself: we have created it. It has no laws outside those of our own making. More to the point, the economy should be subordinated to human thriving; human thriving should not be sacrificed to the economy. To imagine that there is a thing called the economy to which our health must be subordinated is to get the entire relationship backwards and to engage in a destructive form of thinking, which forces people to enter into situations that are not healthy for them because they don't have the resources to withstand unemployment. No one should have to make that choice.