

Review

Not in the Greater Good: Academic Capitalism and Faculty Labor in Higher Education

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Abstract: American public universities have assumed business-minded practices and norms that more closely align with the goals and values of corporations than social institutions charged with creating and disseminating knowledge. One consistent strategy to lower costs involves faculty labor. Institutions have outsourced educational missions to a largely contingent workforce to decrease instructional costs; over the last two decades, the number of adjunct or part-time faculty now comprises 70% of all faculty. As a result, policies have decreased instructional costs and provided administrators with increased flexibility to respond to student demands. However, research indicates compromised student outcomes, less shared governance, and faculty work–life pressures that can undermine commitment, motivation, and professional identity. The following literature review examines the locus of academic capitalism and faculty labor, theorizing how faculty labor policies infer consequences for equity, inclusion, and social justice in higher education.

Keywords: corporatization; academic capitalism; gig academy; equity; contingent faculty



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1. Introduction

For decades, higher education institutions in the United States have grappled with reduced state investment, uncertain federal research funding [1], and shifting attitudes toward labor and the marketplace [2]. As a consequence of shrinking appropriations—compounded by several cycles of economic recession—American public universities have faced considerable pressure to make up the financial difference, whose real costs typically increase 3–4% annually [3]. As a result, institutions have appropriated norms, values, and practices that more closely resemble for-profit corporations than social institutions charged with creating knowledge, educating the citizenry, and preserving discourse [4,5]. The term “academic capitalism,” then, infers the underlying social and fiscal pressures that mediate institutional decisions [6], often to the detriment of public missions [7]. Practices and norms associated with the public good have been subsumed by those that prioritize efficiency over traditional academic values [8]. This includes policies and practices that minimize non-financial goals, prioritize top-down decision making, and employ at-will labor in service to the bottom line [9].

While American public institutions have many ways to offset funding cutbacks, policy approaches often include faculty labor. One pervasive strategy, for example, involves the outsourcing of instruction to a largely contingent workforce in order to decrease educational costs [10]. Part-time and full-time contingent faculty—known variously as adjuncts, non-tenure track faculty, clinical faculty, lecturers, or instructors—now comprise approximately two-thirds of faculty appointments at American postsecondary institutions and more than 70% of instructional positions; part-time faculty, in particular, account for over 50% of all postsecondary instruction [11]. Approximately 15% of contingent faculty are full-time [12]. Such reconfigurations are consistent with corporatized labor ideals that prioritize cost incentives and market flexibility and infer the proliferation of marketplace thinking across institutions nationwide [2].

One problem, however, is the relationship between these policies and student outcomes. U.S. leaders set ambitious graduation goals to meet workforce demands and improve living standards, including for students who are historically under-represented [13]. This is a particularly salient issue when considering the overall undergraduate of racial and ethnic minority students has increased by 404% over the last three decades [14]. At the same time, administrators have outsourced instructional missions to a mostly contingent workforce [10] that offers subject matter expertise but typically receives lower pay, few benefits, limited access to office space and administrative support, and no job security [11,15]. Although factors that influence student success are varied, research linked contingent faculty increases with negative student outcomes [16–21]. This is particularly concerning for first-year students, especially those who are at-risk or historically under-represented, as contingent faculty teach most developmental and introductory courses [22]. Essentially, institutions pair the most vulnerable students with the least-resourced faculty, possibly lessening their chances of success. This tension between labor policies and negative student outcomes suggests the need for policy responses that address both fiscal realities and student success. It also invites consideration for other ways in which capital-minded policies tacitly impact diversity, inclusion, and equity for higher education faculty. The purpose of the review, then, is to examine the relationship between academic capitalism and faculty labor, who are “academia’s key ‘stakeholders’” [23] (p. 154) and “the heart” that determines “the health” of every higher education institution [24]. In doing so, we offer stakeholders—policymakers, institutional leaders, scholars—an empirical review of studies that help clarify this relationship with implications for equity-minded policies and practices.

The research question driving this inquiry is: What do we know about the interdependence of academic capitalism and faculty labor policies? Data for the study came from 104 sources, with specific consideration for peer-reviewed, empirical studies published in research journals. To avoid repetition, we offer a more fulsome discussion of contingent faculty literature with the implication that many of the issues transfer to tenure-track faculty who, as increasingly managed professionals, report academic norms that align with economic goals, expanded administrative control, and work-lives shaped by performance pressures that emphasize efficiency and cost [6,25]. It is also important to note that although the scholarly literature features various terms such as “Neoliberalism” and “marketisation” to describe this phenomenon, we chose the more narrow term “capitalism” to focus our review. Beyond academic capitalism having a track record in higher education research, we favor the term because it concretely names and categorizes the entrepreneurial-minded behaviors, values, norms consistent with private, for-profit corporate values now commonly incentivized within a higher educational context the last few decades. In contrast, neoliberalism infers a broadly defined ideology that projects free-market fundamentalism on all human interactions. We then organized findings by themes—Instruction and academic capitalism, Governance and academic capitalism, and Work-lives and academic capitalism—with consideration for how prior studies have framed faculty labor and differentiated capital outputs from traditional higher educational ones. To interpret results, we highlight the subtleties with which norms, values, and practices both mediate the day-to-day business of higher education and reveal the hidden costs of capital-minded faculty policies. In preview, the data demonstrate academic capitalism has altered the higher educational landscape with respect to student outcomes, shared governance, and faculty work–life commitment, motivation, and professional identity. These themes infer negative outcomes for already fraught social justice issues with implications for future research.

2. Method

We conducted a systematic review of studies in peer-reviewed research journals, with consideration for relevant books, book chapters, and policy documents. To collect studies

for the review, we developed parameters with regard to publication date, keywords, and sample.

2.1. Selection Criteria

We initially targeted the date of publication range for peer-reviewed articles to coincide with studies during and subsequent to the economic recession that began in 2007. Research conducted since then promised insights into how faculty labor has been reshaped by business-minded policies and practices. However, research suggests the economic crisis merely exacerbated already strained public coffers [26]. Institutions have grappled with declining public investment and research funding for decades. State and federal policy decisions dating to the 1980s have long since realigned the “public good” with the ethos of “individualism, private enterprise, [and] economic goals,” tacitly linking educational goals to individual rather than societal interests [13] (p. 450). Therefore, while we focused on research from the last 15 years, we also included pertinent scholarship dating from the 1990s to add context and depth to the locus of academic capitalism and faculty labor.

Keywords were informed by an initial search of peer-reviewed articles, resource guides, policy documents, and book chapters. For example, based on Slaughter and Rhoades (2004), we included the term “academic capitalism.” Based on Magolda [5], we used “corporatization” as a keyword. Based on Kezar and others [2], we included “gig academy.” We identified relevant faculty studies targeting contingent and tenure-track faculty for insights into the relationship between academic capitalism and faculty labor. Using faculty-related keywords, such as “contingent,” “non-tenure-track,” and “part-time faculty, as well as iterations of “academic capitalism,” our search of university databases revealed 60 peer-reviewed journal articles, including 46 articles published in 27 different higher education-focused journals, nine books, two book chapters, and eight policy documents or education-related resources.

2.2. Analysis

To review the literature, we used content analysis techniques, a method for interpreting content through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns [27]. Our deductive codebook reflected the intention to identify research design elements and corporatization-related descriptors. Design elements included theoretical frameworks, targets of inquiry, and methodological approaches. Data were coded deductively line-by-line using codes derived from prior descriptions in the literature. Concurrently, data were inductively coded using open and in vivo techniques. Codes enabled us to discern themes based on code types to reduce redundancy and locate insight in the literature [28].

3. Results

The review divides the literature into three frames that differentiate capital outputs from traditional higher educational outputs with regard to faculty labor: Instruction and academic capitalism, Governance and academic capitalism, and Work-lives and academic capitalism. The first frame examined the instructional implications of faculty labor policies, as increasing numbers of contingent faculty are responsible for undergraduate instruction [11,15]. Concurrently, tenured and tenure-track faculty are incentivized away from teaching in pursuit of research and external funding. The second theme assessed governance implications, as increasing numbers of administrators and decreasing numbers of tenured and tenure-track faculty participate in the academy. Meanwhile, contingent faculty are excluded from most governance processes. The third theme identified work–life implications, as faculty working environments are shaped by performance pressures and an emphasis on economic values over other metrics. This has compromised autonomy, decreased satisfaction, and undermined professionalism.

3.1. Instruction and Academic Capitalism

To countermand shrinking budgets and expanding costs in other areas of the academy, administrations have implemented labor policies to reduce educational costs, largely through the use of contingent faculty [6,9,29]. This is indicated, in part, by significant shifts in faculty appointment types at American postsecondary institutions over the past few decades [11,15]. While tenured and tenure-track faculty are a fixed operational cost that must be paid regardless of whether revenues increase or decrease, contingent faculty—part-time and full-time non-tenure track faculty—are contracted on a per-course or yearly basis, respectively, and typically earn far less per course [30]. The following studies demonstrated how capital policies have reimagined instructional labor in service to bottom lines, even though the proliferation of contingent faculty infers negative student outcomes.

3.1.1. Decreasing Instructional Costs

Studies documented both increased contingent faculty numbers and their role as a cost-savings measure [31]. Hirings support efforts to decrease instructional costs [6] across disciplines and institutional types [32]. Compensation studies confirm contingent faculty are remunerated less than their faculty colleagues, despite performing many of the same tasks. A study by Monks [30], for example, examined earnings of faculty in all fields of higher education. He reported contingent faculty were significantly less compensated than tenure-track faculty, even after controlling for hours worked. Similarly, other research found contingent faculty remain a significant, long-term cost-savings measure, even as economics improved after the recession [12]. Independent of funding swings, institutions have adopted faculty labor policies in which contingent faculty help administrators manage their resource dependence [33]. The research, however, indicated this shift comes with consequences. While contingent faculty allow for less friction when balancing budgets [26,34], studies indicated they negatively affected student outcomes at the institutional level [16–20,35]. They also can negatively affect student outcomes at the classroom level [36,37], perhaps, due to pedagogical issues [16,18,21,36,38,39].

Corporatized labor policies have contributed to poorer student outcomes in less obvious ways. Overlapping with decreased instructional costs, policies incentivize tenure-track faculty to pursue external funding [6]. Solomon [40] found pre-tenure faculty at research universities either organized their lives around professional responsibilities to publish and pursue grants or felt they risked jeopardizing their professional success. This is consistent with studies of tenure requirements and universities expectations that faculty prioritize external funding and publish at increasingly high rates [6], even as teaching and service compete for time and attention. This is consistent with research describing the unbundling of teaching tasks—curricular design, material preparation, and implementation—that has dis-integrated instructional labor and subjected it to top-down authority [33]. Taken together, this infers poorer classroom outcomes are, in part, an unintended consequence of diverting tenure-line faculty from teaching and limiting student-faculty contact [13,29].

Institutional Outcomes

Findings from a majority of studies indicated contingent faculty—part-time faculty, in particular—negatively influenced undergraduate education outcomes across institution types. This includes graduation [18,21], transferring [16], retention [19] and persistence [16,19]. For example, students who took more classes with contingent faculty at four-year colleges graduated at lower rates [17]. Similarly, as the percentage of part-time faculty increased at two-year institutions, graduation rates decreased [18]. Other research calibrated the negative impact on graduation and transfer rates. Studies reported a 10% increase in overall exposure to part-timers resulted in a 1% reduction in the likelihood of earning an associate degree [34] and 2% less likely to transfer to a four-year institution [16,19]. In concrete terms, students, who averaged 50% of classroom time in courses with part-time faculty, were at least 5% less likely to graduate and 10% less likely to transfer to pursue a baccalaureate degree than students with only full-time faculty.

Beyond completion and transfer rates, studies also noted their influence on retention and progression, as well as student interest. For example, Jaeger and Eagan [19] noted for every 10% increase in students' exposure to part-time faculty, the probability they persisted into the second year dropped by 4%. This effect was consistent across institution type. Similarly, students at doctoral-granting institutions were increasingly less likely to persist into the second year based on exposure to part-time faculty [20]. These are consistent with prior studies that noted contingent faculty lowered overall student persistence [17] and decreased the likelihood that students will take subsequent classes in that subject.

Other studies, however, complicated findings, suggesting negligible or, in professional circumstances, positive influences. Yu and colleagues [41], for example, found the proportion of part-time faculty had a non-significant relationship with students' likelihood of earning degrees or certification. Hoffmann and Oreopoulos [42] investigated the importance of teacher quality across appointment type. They found whether or not faculty teach full-time or part-time, conduct research, are tenured, or highly paid has little influence on the likelihood students drop a course or take subsequent courses in the same subject. Similarly, appointment type was not a factor in developmental math grades or completion rates at community college [43].

Classroom Outcomes

Studies examined the impact of contingent faculty on classroom outcomes, reporting less impactful learning [36,37] and less effective pedagogies [35,38,39], perhaps related to unproductive working conditions [44]. For example, classes taught by contingent faculty resulted in immediate gains in GPA but long-term losses in learning and subsequent grading outcomes in related curriculum [45]. In contrast, more experienced, qualified professors produced students who performed better in follow-up curriculum [36]. This suggests students earned better grades in classes taught by contingent faculty, then suffered the consequences of a less rigorous learning environment in subsequent courses. In fact, issues of grade inflation appeared across studies, even when controlling for other factors [46].

Poorer outcomes, however, may be the result of contingent faculty using less effective pedagogies while operating in less supportive, integrated working conditions [45]. Studies found they were more likely to rely on testing than other assessment strategies [35]; they had lower expectations for students, used less innovative teaching strategies, spent less time preparing for classes, had fewer opportunities for student contact, and had fewer interactions with students outside of the classroom [17,19,22]. Contingent faculty also struggled with motivating and engaging students and with establishing effective policies for classroom management [39]. More alarming, they were less likely to address academic integrity issues, whether discussing issues in class, reporting violations, or enacting preventative measures such as responding to or sanctioning students for cheating [38].

3.2. Governance and Academic Capitalism

Another tenet of corporatization is the emphasis on top-down decision making, marked by expanded managerial supervision and assessment [5,6]. Studies noted the expansion is related to the restructuring of the faculty workforce. Policies that have led to fewer tenure-line faculty [9,47] and marginalized contingent faculty are juxtaposed by an ever-expanded administrative class that has continued to grow since the 1980s [48]. This shift has implications for shared governance. Traditionally, tenure-line faculty are autonomous laborers who participate in governance processes [32]. In the corporatized model, however, tenure is an impediment to institutional flexibility and control [9,47]. Contingent faculty, in contrast, are a fungible source of labor. They often lack basic academic freedoms and are excluded from most shared governance processes [13,24,49–51]. The following studies demonstrated how administration has grown in numbers and, by implication, control [48,51]. Meanwhile, the proliferation of contingent faculty has further tipped the political scales away from shared governance. The implication is that labor

policies have kept workforces lean and hiring practices and conditions flexible [5], but at a cost to one of the central tenets of academe.

3.2.1. Expanding Administrative Control

Institutions have long since invested more in outreach efforts such as fundraising, public relations, and advertising than in undergraduate instruction, libraries, and student financial aid [51]. Schrecker [23] reported this growth in administrative positions as an investment in business-oriented non-academics who have commercial expertise to handle increasingly complex campus operations. However, it also has concretized capital values and strategies, shifting decision-making criteria from “mission and quality to competitiveness, efficiency, and cost effectiveness” [13] (p. 440). Decisions heretofore negotiated through governance processes are routinely made by small cadres of decision makers [5] removed from those doing the work of the university [25].

Beyond the balance sheet, stakeholders have internalized these values in less obvious ways. Shared decision making, for example, is cast as dated, inefficient, and wedded to the status quo. Instead, policies emphasize top-down management strategies and accountability measures in service to productivity goals; rewards and punishment are meted out based on performance gleaned from objective, data-driven assessments [52]. Expanded administrative influence was also evidenced in the language used by campus actors to describe strategic responses to financial difficulties. For example, Magolda [5] noted the pervasive use of “managerial idioms” to discuss strategic responses to difficult economic times, as strategic responses called for labor “downsizing, outsourcing, and subcontracting” (p. 140). Collectively, these allude to the subtle, yet unmistakable altering of traditional higher education governance models in favor of administrative control.

3.2.2. Shrinking Faculty Presence

In concert with expanded administrative numbers, corporatized labor policies have led to fewer faculty able to influence campus decision making. More conservative hiring and promotion policies have led to fewer full-time, tenured faculty [9,47]. By now, the predominantly tenured professoriate of 40 years ago has given way to an ever-increasing, mostly disenfranchised contingent workforce [47]. This has left permanent faculty more vulnerable to the vagaries of administrative responses to budgetary concerns and market demands and less able to share in the privileges and responsibilities of governance [29,33]. Organizational restructuring, for example, is now easier and faster [31]. With fewer faculty checks on administrative power, programs and educators are more easily altered or eliminated. Giroux [25] argued these changes are consistent with institutional logics of corporatization that function to maximize managerial control, while curbing faculty autonomy and capacity to dissent [4], all of which infers barriers for addressing equity and inclusion [33].

As a consequence, campuses have become less collaborative. Environments for contingent faculty are defined by little socialization, assessment, governance opportunities, and curricular development [53,54]. While there were practical, structural, and cultural explanations for their limited influence, the lack of inclusion inferred imbalances at both the institutional and departmental levels [49–51]. Jones and colleagues [50] investigated eligibility for faculty senates at “very high research activity” universities. While full-time contingent faculty were eligible for limited participation at many institutions, part-time faculty were eligible at only 11% of institutions. Essentially, the vast majority of contingents [12] who comprise the largest, fastest growing faculty segment at doctoral-granting institutions [31] did not have a seat at the table.

Instead, contingent faculty are left to rely on administrators or influential faculty to secure support at the institutional level [53]. This is complicated by administrative attitudes towards contingent faculty, which are contradictory, even incoherent. A study by Kezar and Gehrke [54], for example, reported that the deans’ decision-making processes are influenced primarily by external pressures, such as economic conditions, legislation, and political

actors. Despite their concern with the over-reliance on contingent faculty, fiscal pressures mandated hiring policies, even if they felt it compromised the institution. Yet, related research contradicted the notion that their administrative hands were tied. Gehrke and Kezar [51] reported significant relationships between deans' attitudes towards contingent faculty and the existence of supportive campus policies. While economics and organizational norms contributed to policy decisions, deans' attitudes were predictive of campus policy support and ratification. Collectively, these findings illustrate the tensions, even incoherence, of capital labor policies. Deans were both vulnerable to external influences that drive policy decisions and key influencers of policy agendas. Relevant faculty policies, then, were both beyond the purview of their administrative reach and reflective of their attitudes and values.

Studies also reported contingent faculty were mostly excluded from department-level governance. Despite subject matter expertise, contingent instructors have less input or control over curricula, often deferring to department leaders to create cultures that support, ignore, or inhibit inclusiveness and productivity [49,53–55]. Department chairs, specifically, drove policies, practices, and programs [54] and were instrumental in supporting, integrating, and retaining them [56]. They provided contingent faculty with collegial support [55]. They are viewed as the locus of decision making, schedule setting, and other daily operations. However, chairs more often contributed to environments that ignored contingent faculty needs or actively undermined them, whereas positive cultures mostly resulted from the absence of negative policies [53]. Collectively, findings suggested department leaders may be unaware, uninterested, or unprepared to accommodate contingent faculty. This is consistent with other research suggesting department leaders do not take regular action to integrate contingent faculty. This has led to professional environments of disconnection, isolation, and lack of recognition that intensified over time [57,58]. The implication is that contingent faculty do not have the agency to participate in departmental politics. Instead, they are dependent on leadership to create department cultures that support inclusivity [51].

Overall, contingent faculty remain largely unaccounted for in decision-making processes. As a general consequence, less participation meant fewer opportunities to foster constructive, multi-dimensional conflicts that enhance or challenge decision making. As a specific consequence, contingent faculty were denied access to an important vehicle for organizational change [59], thus tacitly undermining equity and inclusion efforts due to their status as “permanent at-will labor” [31] (p. 110). Even when contingent faculty are permitted to contribute, eligibility policies do not facilitate participation. Leaders may assume inclusive policies ensure contributions; however, this ignores complications—such as lack of communication, time, or incentives [60]—or “token” inclusion policies with partial or no voting rights [61].

3.3. *Work-Lives and Academic Capitalism*

Corporatization also infers a shift in work-lives related to performance pressures and an emphasis on business values—such as efficiency and cost—over other metrics [8,29,62,63]. Research examining the culture of corporatization in higher education suggested the willingness to sacrifice quality for efficiency [8], reshaping academic values and ethics of public service into an ideology of “venture and risk” [64] (p. 65). The following studies demonstrated how the primacy of economic values has reshaped the professoriate. For contingent faculty, in particular, professional work-lives were further compromised by their provisional status. The implication is that corporatized labor policies have contributed to more stressful, less autonomous, satisfied faculty, regardless of appointment type.

3.3.1. Increased Pressures, Decreased Control

Studies of tenure-line faculty work-lives were hindered by increased pressures and external controls. Findings suggested potential costs to professional identities, commitment, and motivation, regardless of appointment status. Overly regulated environments, for ex-

ample, altered or impeded the development of faculty professional identities. Summarizing data from a survey conducted by more than a hundred scholars from eighteen countries, Hao [65] reported performance pressures have transitioned faculty from a “community of scholars in a knowledge community” to “a community of workers in a knowledge enterprise” (p. 113–114). Further, faculty who recounted significantly higher levels of external controls and performance pressures also reported being less satisfied with academia and more likely to leave the academy [66]. They also expressed decreased motivation to work in regulated environments with less control over rules and policies and minimal involvement in campus management [67]. This is consistent with other research describing tenure-track faculty as more burdened by labor policies and expectations and more vulnerable to work–life imbalances [40] and tenure ambiguities [68]. Increasingly top-down productivity demands have contributed to feelings of stress and anxiety, which have implications for productivity, commitment, motivation, and morale [40,62]. This is a troubling portent in light of research connecting high stress levels to faculty willingness to leave positions if or when other opportunities appear.

3.3.2. Provisional Status, Conditional Professionalism

Studies specifically targeting contingent faculty work-lives further evidenced external controls that marginalized or excluded them from the academy beyond the classroom. As a result, they reported conflicted professional identities marked by contrasting feelings of inclusion and exclusion [69]. Across institution types, contingent faculty viewed themselves both as professionals with expertise and as undervalued affiliates lacking professional status and autonomy [58]. Levin and Shaker [70], for example, reported full-time non-tenure track faculty as having a hybrid identity. They identified as experts when with students. Yet, in interactions with tenured faculty or administration, they perceived their status as diminished in the academic hierarchy. Similarly, Schrecker [23] noted their “double-consciousness” of being seen by students as professors, yet largely excluded from decision-making bodies and viewed by colleagues with ambivalence (p. 211). Other research reported contingent faculty struggled with job insecurity and feelings of being undercompensated and inconsistent department expectations [24].

Part-time faculty, in particular, experienced contrasting conditions that undermined feelings of competence and professionalism. Levin and Hernandez [69] found part-time faculty felt like specialized professionals with self-efficacy in the classroom that was absent in other organizational contexts. This diminished confidence in their professional value. Other research suggested these negative self-perceptions can deepen over time. Thirolf [57] noted part-time faculty initially developed a positive identity through teaching and interacting with students; over time, however, feelings of professional commitment and pride lessened, especially when comparing themselves to the rights and privileges of full-time colleagues. Both were consistent with a study by Kezar [71] on how contingent faculties construct their work environments. Findings described faculty operating in unsupportive cultures struggled to integrate into the department.

Conflicted feelings reported by contingent faculty may be tacitly reiterated by campus leaders, who expressed ambivalent attitudes and low expectations [49,50,54,72–75]. In a study of independent colleges and universities, chief academic officers indicated that they did not expect part-time faculty to engage with campus communities nor provide them with the necessary support to participate in a range of faculty roles [76]. Similarly, Maxey and Kezar [72] found leaders from a range of groups associated with academe (e.g., governing boards, accreditation agencies, faculty groups, state compacts, unions) were aware that contingent faculty practices and conditions are poorly aligned with student outcomes and faculty professionalism. However, they indicated institutional conditions constrained their capacity to respond, even at the cost of student outcomes.

Mid-level administrators expressed similar attitudes of ambivalence towards contingent faculty. Meyer’s [73] study of deans and directors of nursing schools described the dual-purpose roles of contingent faculty: they were seen as a source of diversity beneficial

to students who also degraded instructional consistency; they were workers who freed up full-time faculty to pursue scholarship, yet burdened the remaining full-time faculty with departmental responsibilities such as advising, academic governance, and committee work; they were an inexpensive, flexible workforce, yet lacked commitment, making it difficult to find and keep qualified faculty.

Departmental administration further complicated how contingent faculty construct professional identities [50]. While department chairs appeared sensitive to contingent faculty needs—voicing concerns about marginalizing elements such as poor communication, lack of recognition and opportunities to develop faculty [57]—they reported frustration and overwhelm. They appreciated the flexibility of contingent faculty, though they struggled with the added workloads [46]. Other research noted they overlook contingent faculty in the face of administrative responsibilities that impel them to prioritize other department needs [54]. This is especially true of part-time faculty, who were largely absent from department functions and rarely expected to contribute outside of the classroom. Moorehead [75], for example, noted chairs have lower expectations for part-time faculty and were less invested in integrating them into their departments. They rarely tracked faculty beyond basic hiring information, instead relying heavily on student evaluations for assessment, accountability, and reappointment [76]. This is consistent with research that reported chairs used part-time faculty chiefly because they did not have enough full-time faculty; nearly 80% would prefer to replace all part-time faculty with full-time tenure track faculty [77]. Collectively, these findings help contextualize contingent faculty perceptions. As a direct point of contact, chairs support faculty to achieve departmental goals [78]. Yet, findings suggest they view contingent faculty as burdensome institutional realities they would prefer to change.

4. Discussion

This review converged corporatization literature with relevant faculty studies to examine the nexus of academic capitalism and faculty labor policies, which infers negative implications for student success, shared governance, and faculty work-lives. In what follows, we review key findings from the literature, theorizing the equity, and inclusion implications of capital-minded faculty labor policies, then close with suggestions for future research.

Academic Capitalism and Faculty Labor

First, the dataset revealed how faculty labor policies are consistent with the changing roles of the professoriate. Traditional notions of the teacher-scholar are belied by more recent studies that divide faculty into separate roles based on appointment type: A contingent workforce implements instructional missions. Tenure-line faculties are recast as “entrepreneurs” leveraging their capital to connect higher education to the economy. As a benefit, cheap labor policies have decreased instructional costs and increased flexibility, enabling administrators to respond quickly to student demands. Concurrently, research agendas offer alternative revenue streams. [6]

One compromise, however, is that policies suggest poorer student outcomes for graduation, retention, transferring, and persistence. They also infer poorer performances in the classroom, including less impactful learning for students subject to less effective pedagogies from faculty operating in less supportive working conditions. While diverse pools of students seeking higher education should invite innovative approaches to learning, especially for those who are at-risk or historically under-represented, leaders instead fund undergraduate instruction as a cost-cutting measure [48].

Cheap labor policies, then, demonstrate the diverging logics of academic capitalism and higher education as a public good [63], casting a dubious light on institutional priorities including authentic diversity and inclusion efforts: In over half of all states, the majority of higher education revenues come from student tuition [23]. Including educational appropriations, decreased spending on instruction is sharply contrasted with the total amount

of monies that institutions earn from student enrollments [10]. However, instruction remains a key place to cut costs. This tension between revenues and expenditures suggests undergraduate instruction is valuable chiefly for the monies it generates. Rather than frame cheap labor policies as an effort to reduce instructional costs, perhaps, it would be more accurately cast as the willingness to divest in education. This is particularly troubling as increasingly diverse student populations have greater access to higher education.

Next, the dataset indicated how cheap labor policies are consistent with changes to shared governance, having tacitly moved institutions towards top-down decision making. Administrative positions have grown exponentially in the last few decades [44]. The addition of business-oriented non-academics has supported institutions in handling increasing complex, commercial operations [29]. However, growth also corresponds with shrinking numbers of tenure-line faculty to bear shared governance responsibilities and the proliferation of contingent faculty. As a result, faculties are potentially more vulnerable to administrative control and have fewer checks on administrative power or the ability to challenge decisions and implement authentic change [26,31]. This tension is consistent with the logic of academic capitalism that functions to maximize managerial control while curbing labor autonomy and dissent [4,22]. As increasingly diverse pools of faculty enter higher education, cheap labor policies overburden them with responsibilities or exclude them from the inner workings of the academy, thus undermining equity-minded efforts. Rather than implementing inclusive policies and imbuing communities of scholars with the agency to support real change, leaders are creating diverse communities of workers in a knowledge enterprise with limited power to leverage change [64]. Consistent with this logic, the ongoing over-reliance on contingent faculty remains the main strategic response to organizational change, even as administrators repeatedly re-hire the same faculty semester after semester, suggesting haphazard, stop-gap planning and vision rather than thoughtful faculty policies employed in the long-term interest and betterment of the academy [78].

Last, the dataset showed how cheap labor policies have reshaped work environments. The emphasis on productivity and efficiency—manifest as performance pressures and external controls—over other cultural metrics further evidenced the willingness to replace traditional academic values with business-minded ones [8]. Studies suggested overly regulated and pressurized environments diminished commitment [64] and motivation, while compromising professional identities, regardless of appointment type [58,64,66,70,71]. This was more plainly evident in studies of contingent faculty, who struggled to find their professional footing in environments dependent on their expertise, yet unsupported by faculty norms. However, this was no less true for any faculty operating in environments of top-down controls, oversight, and performance pressures. Essentially, cheap labor policies and practices have contributed to more stressful, less autonomous, satisfying faculty work-lives. This is particularly true for female faculty members and faculty members of color, who are disproportionately affected by structural inequities in higher education [79]. As the literature reminds us, cheap labor policies consistently prioritize immediate fiscal needs with seemingly little consideration for long-term consequences, inviting further questions about the sustainability of the academy.

5. Conclusions

As U.S. higher education institutions continue to diversify at both the student and faculty levels, in parallel with increasingly embracing practices of academic capitalism that result in widening the equity gap, it behooves institutional leadership to consider equity and inclusion in connection with historical and political [80], but also economic understandings of inequality. In reinvigorating such critiques of the academy, as targeted in this review, we suggest economic inquiries warrant our attention if scholars and other stakeholders are to authentically address issues of social justice. Subsequent institutional attempts to center equity-minded practices in the academy, then, infer a multifaceted approach that should account for the effects of capital-minded beliefs, norms, and values on multiple axes of inequity. As such, it is incumbent upon scholars to pursue empirical work that

supports policymakers in rendering informed, holistic, data-driven decisions from this considered lens. Our findings suggest there is a significant need to reconsider what is in the greater good for the longevity of U.S. higher education and its many, increasingly diverse stakeholders.

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