

Serf or Savior? The Struggle for Equity on Behalf of Adjunct Faculty

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The status of university faculty variously designated as Adjuncts, Part-timers, Lecturers, or Instructors is unquestionably connected to the notion of collegiality on today's campus. Their position in academia, their involvement (or lack thereof) within the university community, and the benefits and disadvantages that result from their employment all speak to broader issues relating to the future of our higher educational system. No matter what term a particular college or university applies, everyone knows adjuncts as faculty who are hired to teach on a semester-to-semester basis with no guarantee of future employment.

Part-time faculty are today as much a part of American academia as tenured professors. The numbers of adjuncts have increased from about 32 percent of all faculty in 1980¹ to more than 50 percent today.² Adjuncts are essential for a university to meet its needs and the needs of its students. Practically every institution of higher education, from the Ivy League to the local community college, employs part-time or temporary faculty. Adjuncts enhance colleges' flexibility to schedule the appropriate number of courses during times of higher or lower enrollment, and they bring specialized and "real life" skills that full-time faculty may not have to business, law, and other professional classes.

The fundamental motivation for hiring adjuncts, however, is the one that causes the most contention and eclipses all other reasons given for their presence on campus: using part-time faculty saves universities a lot of money. The economic benefit of employing part-time teachers is clear. Their earnings have always been a fraction of full-time faculty salaries, and adjuncts rarely receive medical and pension benefits.³ Universities can also make ends meet by canceling adjuncts' classes if they don't fill and by replacing tenured positions with several part-time instructors.

The nature of adjunct employment creates workplace stress: the adjunct professor has a job, but it may be withdrawn or not renewed at any time. Often, part-timers are not hired until right before the semester begins, forcing them to scramble to put together a syllabus and order textbooks (or to use pre-selected textbooks they may not like). In addition, adjuncts sometimes lack a suitable place to hold office hours for their students. Because many teach in the evening, their access to office staff, copy machines, and mailboxes may be limited.

Adjuncts are further marginalized from academic life when they must teach at several different schools each semester in order to earn at least a minimal living wage. These "Road Scholars" or "Freeway Flyers" often drive hundreds of miles each week between schools, spending very little time at each school, and thus may be unable to devote much time and

attention to students or campus events. Their inferior working conditions may also lead to frustration and low morale, a negative in any workplace. Yet further, they may feel pressured to give students better grades to ensure that students give them positive ratings on class evaluations and recommend their classes to friends.

But low pay and heavy course loads are not the only issues that lead to discontent among adjuncts. Part-time faculty members usually do not receive subsidized health coverage through their employer. The availability of health benefits has been a virulent topic of recent political talk shows and newspaper op-ed pages. Within and outside the university, healthcare has been gobbling up a greater percentage of families' budgets, and thus has increasingly been framed in terms of basic human rights. At some Catholic universities, students and faculty are calling for health benefits for part-time employees as a matter of the universities' social mission. At Marquette, a Jesuit university, the Theology Department has issued a statement that part-time faculty should be fully covered by the university's plan, rather than be expected to contribute out of pocket as they have done in the past. Professor Daniel Maguire, who has spearheaded this movement, notes that the presence of adjunct teachers on campus allows full-timers to pursue their research:⁴ "How could I teach Christian ethics and sit on my privilege as a tenured faculty member and ignore people doing the heavy lifting?"⁵ Whether Marquette or other Catholic universities will adopt paid medical plans for adjuncts remains to be seen.

Adjunct professors thus may find themselves at odds with full-time faculty.⁶ Part-timers are frustrated by the contention that they are somehow "less" than their tenured colleagues. Adjuncts' level of education and experience is sometimes identical to that of full-time professors.⁷ Their perception of working for institutions and departments that do not value or care about them may lead them to feel exploited.⁸ They must battle the persistent notion that adjuncts are not as dedicated as full-timers. As one administrator asserted, "The quality of a university rests with the quality of its permanent faculty [...] Those are the people you count on."⁹

Unfortunately, a few studies do suggest that the use of adjuncts has a negative impact on the student bodies they are hired to teach.¹⁰ There is no doubt that students' learning experiences may be diminished by professors who have no connection to their university and who are rarely available out of class. Other researchers, however, propose that adjuncts who are fully incorporated into their programs can have a positive effect on students.¹¹ Thus, it may not be a faculty member's part-time status that is detrimental to students, but the fact that the faculty member is not given an opportunity to be a full participant in his or her department.

Full-time faculty and higher education advocates have voiced concern about the growing number of adjuncts teaching at universities. Their unease does not necessarily reflect misgivings about the quality of adjunct teaching (although these ideas persist among some faculty); rather, these professors note that more adjuncts mean fewer tenured positions.¹² Each time a faculty member retires and the university replaces her or him with several part-time instructors (or a non-tenure-track full-timer) in order to avoid the costs associated with a tenured position, it weakens the system upon which the university is built. As the American Association of

University Professors' report on the status of non-tenure-track faculty states: "Academic programs and a tenure system are not stable when institutions rely heavily on non-tenure-track faculty[.]"¹³ The AAUP also sees a higher percentage of adjuncts as an opening for universities to restrict free speech in the classroom, in that adjuncts do not have the protection of tenure and their employment may be terminated at any time.¹⁴ With tenured professors fast becoming a minority on campus, the potential exists for universities to ignore the concerns of all faculty.

Some observers, including, perhaps surprisingly, several full-time faculty members, have called for an overhaul in the university hiring and promotion system. They advocate the elimination or overhaul of the holy grail of academia: the tenure system. Some believe it is impossible to sustain a system that does not allow lay-offs as universities are increasingly turning to a business model of management.¹⁵ Several schools have abolished tenure; others tried, but failed.¹⁶ But education advocates have condemned the reduction of tenure lines. The AAUP, in fact, not only advocates for better pay and benefits for adjuncts, but, in its support of tenure as fundamental to the university, has proposed that universities create a new tenure category consisting of part-time faculty members whose services, after some specified number of years or courses, could make them eligible for this job protection.¹⁷

By depending on low-paid adjuncts to balance their budgets, universities are creating a situation that serves few in the community. The realities of part-time teaching – limited time on campus and access to services, high turnover rates, and appointments at multiple schools – undermine the educational goals of all institutions of higher education.

Today, adjuncts are increasingly vocal about their significance on campus and are asking for better pay, working conditions, and benefit packages. They have formed faculty organizations within their universities to advocate for their financial and educational needs, and some aim to join unions. Adjuncts at Temple University in Philadelphia, for example, held "Adjunct Awareness Week" to gain support and encourage union membership among the university's 1,500 part-time faculty.

Additionally, several national and international organizations devoted to improving conditions for adjuncts have been founded. In addition to the AAUP's support of adjunct parity, there are many places for faculty to turn for information and support for equitable pay and benefits. The *Adjunct Advocate*, a magazine devoted to part-time faculty issues, has now expanded to become the website "Adjunctnation.com," which provides an on-line community for adjuncts, as well as offering employment information and insight. New Faculty Majority: The National Coalition for Adjunct and Contingent Equity has been founded to achieve "equity and advanc[e] academic freedom for all adjunct and contingent faculty in American colleges and universities through advocacy, education and litigation."¹⁸ Its website provides part-time faculty with links to articles, videos, blogs, and other resources. COCAL, the Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor, is a North American organization intent on improving conditions for all contingent faculty (including graduate students). COCAL sponsors a biennial conference with presentations on unionization, equity in the workplace, and other points of interest for those working part-time in higher education. Its ninth conference, "Towards a United Strategy in North America," recently took

place in Quebec City, and included workshops such as “Mobilizing to Improve Working Conditions” and “Recognition of Adjunct Faculty and the Quality of Education.”¹⁹

Some faculty are also turning to newer media such as blogs, Twitter, and YouTube to garner support for the plight of adjuncts. Individuals and adjunct organizations have posted videos, often infused with humor, to plead their cases. Videos, such as “A Day in the Life of an Adjunct,” feature the long hours and commutes that are part of many adjuncts’ teaching days. Marc Bousquet’s YouTube clips, the on-line counterpart to his book *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation*, include interviews with faculty and students who are struggling to survive in today’s academic environment.

So if conditions are so horrible for adjuncts at community colleges, four-year institutions, and universities, why do so many of them continue to teach? Although some teach part-time as a result of failing to attain a tenured or other full-time position, others prefer teaching part-time to anything else they might do.²⁰ History professor Edward Rice-Maximin saw the opportunity to teach a variety of courses at many different schools as the real benefit of part-time teaching: “I have [...] engaged a broader spectrum of history than I might have had I been ensconced in a specialty. [...] I have taught every course I have ever wanted to teach, plus many I am glad I learned to teach. [...] I have been exempt from most committee work and academic advising and mostly immune to departmental politics, benefits many full-timers might envy me for.”²¹

The question to ask in 2010 is this: Should adjunct faculty, many of whom hold terminal degrees, who have a lifetime of experience after having taught semester after semester at the same institution, and who contribute to the strength of the programs in which they teach, be considered primarily as cost-savers for their university? At a time of budget cuts at both state and private schools, the monetary value of adjunct faculty is increasingly important. But wouldn’t the quality of the education be better if professors’ salaries were based on experience and education instead of the bottom line? As the AAUP states, “Hiring faculty on the basis of the lowest labor cost and without professional working conditions ‘represents a disinvestment in the nation’s intellectual capital precisely at the time when innovation and insight are most needed.’”²² Conditions for adjuncts are slowly improving, but for most there is a long way to go. In addition to equitable pay and benefits, part-timers should have the opportunity to participate in university governance. Some institutions, such as Villanova University, where I work, now have adjunct representatives on their faculty councils. Departments should be encouraged to include part-time faculty at meetings and social functions. These measures can go a long way to support university-wide collegiality and allow adjuncts to become a more visible and vital presence in campus life.

Notes

1. Judith M. Gappa, citing the National Center for Education Statistics in *Part-Time Faculty: Higher Education at a Crossroads*, ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Research Report No. 3 (Washington, DC: Association for the Study of Higher Education, 1984), 10.

2. "Background Facts on Contingent Faculty: Trends in Faculty Status," www.aaup.org/AAUP/issues/contingent/contingentfacts.htm. The percentage is higher at community colleges.
3. On average, adjuncts' salaries are one-quarter of that of a full-time professor. See *Reversing Course: The Troubled State of Academic Staffing and a Path Forward* (Washington, DC: American Federation of Teachers: 2008), 8–9, www.aft.org/pdfs/highered/reversingcourse1008.pdf.
4. "I have tenure. I have good benefits, and there are people doing as much work as I am. And they don't have health insurance. They are covering most of our courses so we can have these leisurely 3–2 schedules." See Scott Jaschik, "Liberation (of Adjuncts) Theology," *Inside Higher Education*, April 24, 2008, www.insidehighered.com/news/2008/04/24/marquette.
5. Tori Dykes, "Senate hopes to improve adjunct conditions," *The Marquette Journal Online*, November 12, 2009, <http://marquettetribune.org/2009/11/12/news/senate-hopes-to-improve-adjunct-conditions>.
6. The relationship between adjuncts and tenured professors is sometimes referred to as "haves vs. have-nots." See for example, Michael Fischer, "Defending Collegiality," *Change* (May/June 2009), www.changemag.org/May-June%202009/full-defending-collegiality.html.
7. Twenty-seven percent of all part-time faculty hold a PhD. See James Monks, "Who Are the Part-Time Faculty?" *Academe on Line* (July-August 2009), www.aaup.org/AAUP/pubsres/academe/2009/JA/Feat/monk.htm.
8. Eric Fox, "Adjuncts exploited on college campuses," *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, September 28, 2009, <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=1867342521&Fmt=3&clientId=3260&RQT=309&VName=PQD>.
9. Christoph M. Kimmich, interim Chancellor at City University of New York, quoted in Karen W. Arenson, "Part-Time Faculty Is an Issue Now at CUNY," *The New York Times*, February 14, 1998, <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=26229726&Fmt=3&clientId=3260&RQT=309&VName=PQD>.
10. See, for example, Florence Kirk and Charles A Spector, "A Comparison of the Achievement of Students Taught by Full-Time versus Adjunct Faculty in Business Courses," *Academy of Educational Leadership Journal* 13/2 (2009): 73–81, <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=1869956301&Fmt=3&clientId=3260&RQT=309&VName=PQD>.
11. See Jeffrey Klausman, "Not Just a Matter of Fairness: Adjunct Faculty and Writing Programs in Two-Year Colleges," *Teaching English in the Two Year College* 37/4 (May 2010): 363–371, <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=2021442741&Fmt=3&clientId=3260&RQT=309&VName=PQD>, or Peter Schmidt, "Use of Part-Time Instructors Tied to Lower Student Success," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 14, 2008, <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=1606075411&Fmt=3&clientId=3260&RQT=309&VName=PQD>.
12. By 2007, almost 70 percent of faculty members were employed off the tenure track. See "Conversion of Appointments to the Tenure Track" (2009), www.aaup.org/AAUP/comm/rep/conversion.htm.
13. See "The Status of Non-Tenure-Track Faculty," www.aaup.org/AAUP/comm/rep/nontenuretrack.htm.
14. "Academic freedom is weakened when a majority of the faculty lack the protections of tenure." See "Background Facts on Contingent Faculty," www.aaup.org/AAUP/issues/contingent/contingentfacts.htm.

15. Mark C. Taylor, chair of Columbia University's Department of Religion, has been particularly vocal. See, for example, "End the University as We Know It," *The New York Times*, April 26, 2009, www.nytimes.com/2009/04/27/opinion/27taylor.html?pagewanted=2&_r=1&sq=mark%20C.%20taylor&st=nyt&scp=2; "Unsustainable and Indefensible," July 29, 2010, www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2010/07/19/what-if-college-tenure-dies/why-tenure-is-unsustainable-and-indefensible; and his new book, *Crisis on Campus: A Bold Plan for Reforming Our Colleges and Universities* (New York: Knopf, 2010).
16. See Brent Staples, "The End of Tenure?" *The New York Times*, June 29, 1997, www.nytimes.com/1997/06/29/opinion/the-end-of-tenure.html?scp=19&sq=bennington%20college%20tenure&st=cse.
17. See "Tenure and Teaching-Intensive Appointments" (2010), www.aaup.org/AAUP/comm/rep/conversion.htm.
18. See www.newfacultymajority.info/national/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=76&Itemid=147.
19. See http://cocalinternational.org/programme_english.pdf.
20. Almost half of adjuncts who completed a recent AAUP survey said they preferred teaching part-time, some because it accommodated their family life. See Robin Wilson, "'Chronicle' Survey Yields a Rare Look into Adjuncts' Work Lives," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 18, 2009, <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=1926360701&Fmt=3&clientId=3260&RQT=309&VName=PQD>. See also *American Academic: A National Survey of Part-time/Adjunct Faculty 2* (American Federation of Teachers: March 2010), www.aft.org/pdfs/highered/aa_partimefaculty0310.pdf.
21. Edward Rice-Maximin, "Reflections of a Part-Timer" *Perspectives on History Online* 41/4 (April 2003), <http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2003/0304/0304vie1.cfm>.
22. AAUP, quoting its 2009 *Report on the Economic Status of the Profession*, in "Tenure and Teaching-Intensive Appointments," n. 17 above.