

ADJUNCT FACULTY: Valued Resource or Cheap Labor?

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ABSTRACT

Are adjunct faculty a valued and necessary teaching resource at institutions of higher education, or are they really just a source of cheap labor? Both viewpoints, along with many in between, can be found in the literature regarding the use of adjunct faculty or part-time instructors in today's colleges and universities. What is also evident in the literature is the sense that "those faculty members are critical to the financial and programmatic viability of their institutions" (Ellison, 2002, p.3). It appears that colleges and universities would not be able to remain open without adjunct faculty; part-time instructors now constitute approximately 50% of the total professoriate in this country (Jacoby, 2006; Schneider, 1999). Yet it seems that many adjuncts still do not receive the respect they deserve or the support they need to do their jobs properly, from either their full-time colleagues or the administration. Could they be considered the last marginalized group on American campuses? It is an issue that needs to be addressed in order to maintain the integrity of the American postsecondary institution and quality education for all students.

Characteristics of Adjunct Faculty Positions

For the most part, being hired as an adjunct faculty member means being hired on a part-time basis, either in terms of work load or length of time in a given position. This allows for the applicability of the following descriptors: non-tenured, non-permanent, paid per course, year-by-year appointments, little or no health insurance or retirement benefits, few raises or other opportunities for promotions, and very little voice in the decisions affecting them (Banachowski, 1997).

Adjunct faculty may hold doctorates, master's degrees, or bachelor's degrees, depending on the hiring institution. Generally, the lower the level of postsecondary institution, the lower is the degree requirements for both full-time and part-time faculty. Community colleges employ the greatest percentage of adjunct faculty, with approximately two of every three faculty working part-time (Parsons, 1998). Nearly all disciplines in higher education use adjunct faculty to teach certain courses, some more than others. Part-time faculty are employed by all types and levels of colleges and universities; again, some more than others (Gappa & Leslie, 1993).

What is interesting to note is the new genre of faculty position that has emerged with the extensive use of part-time faculty in areas such as math and English, something that could be called a full-time temporary appointment. Full-time temporary faculty teach multiple sections of basic courses, have clearly defined work loads, participate more actively in departmental governance, and receive better compensation packages, often including health insurance and retirement benefits (Gappa & Leslie, 1993). They work full time but are still considered temporary employees since they are generally appointed for one year at a time and with no job security. These temporary faculty members give more service to their institutions, provide more instructional continuity for students, and are better integrated into their departments than typical adjunct faculty. However, as with adjunct faculty, their salaries are much lower than those of tenured or tenure-track faculty.

Reasons for Hiring Adjunct Faculty

In these times of diminishing budgets, the primary reason for hiring adjuncts is economic. Simply put, it costs institutions much less for each adjunct they hire compared to a full-time faculty member, and/or they can hire more teachers for the same amount of money. Along with the financial savings to institutions is the large pool of people who are seemingly willing to be hired as part-time faculty with lower wages and few benefits, making the whole situation possible. According to Cohen and Brawer (1996), these part-time faculty, who agree to the hiring practices of their institutions, are paid an average of one-third of the salary packages of full-time faculty at the community college level. A similar gap is likely to be found in most institutions of higher education.

Other factors are involved in the reasons behind hiring adjunct faculty. Enrollment has been and continues to be on the rise at all levels of higher education. Academic departments within colleges and universities have room for only a certain number of permanent faculty. The number of classes needed to serve all students is generally not within the bounds of an acceptable work load for tenured or tenure-track faculty. Thus, we see the growing practice of hiring part-time faculty to teach introductory classes with large numbers of students. At institutions with strong research orientation and graduate programs, many of the senior faculty members are less interested in teaching those lower level courses (Gappa & Leslie, 1993).

Employment Practices Regarding Adjunct Faculty

It seems that keeping adjunct faculty at a part-time status is the goal of many institutions. To ensure flexibility, department chairs are willing to continue offering one-year appointments over and over again. According to Jacoby (2006), some faculty are barred from more than a 50% load in order to have benefits denied. Some institutions will even interrupt the continuity of an adjunct with a full teaching load to avoid the appearance of de-facto tenure.

Adjunct faculty generally have higher course loads than full-time faculty, but they rarely teach the higher level courses. There is typically no expectation for research or service among adjunct faculty. While this is fair and commensurate in terms of their lower salaries, it also may contribute to part-time faculty feeling alienated from full-time colleagues and the departments in which they work.

With the exception of some of the full-time temporary teachers described earlier, most adjunct faculty are paid per course, higher at four-year institutions and lower at the community college level. According to Smallwood (2001), 75% of all adjuncts get paid less than \$3,000 per course. Salaries for adjunct faculty are slightly better where collective bargaining is allowed and used.

There are very few benefits typically available for adjunct faculty. The overall lack of health coverage is seen as the most serious and controversial. Less than 25% of departments in higher education offer health insurance to part-time faculty (Smallwood, 2001) and most adjuncts also do not receive retirement benefits. A few institutions do offer tuition remission for children of both full-time and part-time faculty.

Adjunct faculty claim low levels of support from the departments in which they work and from the institutions that hired them. Cohen and Brawer (1996) reported that colleges tend to invest few resources in part-time faculty, because they view these teachers as transients. Adjuncts often have to work in cramped spaces or offices, if they have an office at all. Jacobs (1998) stated that most part-time faculty lack on-campus office space and are forced often to meet their students in hallways. Feelings of vulnerability in terms of job security are commonplace as adjuncts realize their positions can be terminated at any time. Some part-time faculty report feeling welcome and comfortable in their departments, but it seems that most feel their role is not respected and they are not given many opportunities for involvement.

A young woman with a Ph.D. in the humanities came in second for a tenure-track position at a prestigious university on her first job search. After working as an adjunct for five years, during which time she had failed to land a permanent position in spite of rigorously applying, she described her feelings this way:

I'm utterly invisible . . . I die a small death every time I feign a brisk cheerfulness as I explain to one of the secretaries in the office that I am So-and-So who needs you to please unlock the door of office number XXX so that I can hold the weekly office hours for which I am not paid.
(Smallwood, 2004, p.A10)

Referring to herself as the Invisible Adjunct on a now defunct weblog of her own creation, she said the following about her intentions to leave academia:

It's not something like a 9-5 job that you did for awhile and it didn't work out. There is a serious identity investment. You *are* an academic. Then you don't get a job and you think: "I'm nothing. I'm worthless." (Smallwood, 2004, p.A10)

Impact of Adjunct Faculty Policies on Higher Education

How are adjunct faculty truly perceived by institutions that hire them and how do they perform in their positions? Are they a valued resource made up of essential, less costly, yet dedicated teachers who willingly work part-time and accept the conditions of their employment? Or are they essentially cheap labor for their institutions, teachers who are needed by higher education but who are exploited, underpaid, and not integrated into their departments? It would seem that, at the present, both of these are true. It is true, without doubt, that the American system of higher education is now dependent upon the use of adjunct or part-time faculty, given that almost half of the total professoriate works only part-time (Schneider, 1999).

Many of the people currently working as adjuncts have willingly accepted their positions of part-time employment, fully realizing their substandard wages and benefits. There are many reasons, including the desire to teach for personal growth and satisfaction, to share real-world expertise, or to earn extra income. Yet, most part-timers express anger and frustration over their exclusion from collegial activities and career opportunities and the general lack of appreciation. The practice continues because, in almost all geographical locations, the number of candidates willing to accept the conditions of working part time in academia outnumber the opportunities available. Gappa and Leslie (1993) described the situation as follows:

The academic profession has slowly but inexorably become bifurcated into two faculties: the tenured "haves" and the temporary, part-time "have-nots." The reason for the two faculties is that one sustains the other: the low costs and heavy teaching loads of the have-nots help make possible the continuation of a tenure system that protects the jobs and perquisites of the haves. (p.2)

Gappa and Leslie (1993) stated that many adjunct faculty are well qualified for their positions. Consequently, it might seem that there are no real disadvantages to the hiring of part-time faculty in the manner that presently occurs, especially considering the fiscal constraints that many colleges and universities are currently facing. However, the dangers of the bifurcated system now in place should not be overlooked. It is not difficult to imagine the eventual disillusionment and lack of motivation of college

teachers who not only receive substandard wages and benefits, but who are also not integrated into the departments for which they teach. Research suggests that part-timers rely on traditional pedagogy and often fail to incorporate new methods of teaching (Banachowski, 1997). Is this a surprise, given that part-time faculty get little in the way of support or motivation and are sometimes overused in instructional delivery? The end result of the current system could easily be differentiated teaching services between part-time and full-time faculty and substandard work from some of the adjunct faculty.

Given the growth of and reliance on part-time faculty, the “Invisible Adjunct” (quoted earlier) sees the current two-tiered system as representative of an overall decline in the merit of college instructors. As one thinks about the situation, a profession which seems unable or unwilling to maintain the proper status of all its members is a profession that might have trouble ahead. The “Invisible Adjunct” asked, “Can you think of another profession . . . that would claim that a significant portion of their membership were so lacking in merit as to deserve substandard wages and no benefits?” (Smallwood, 2004, p.A11)

Schneider (1999) added to the list of dangers of exploiting adjunct faculty. She accurately stated that half of the professoriate does not have academic freedom. Adjuncts can be dumped very easily by higher education institutions, and it has happened numerous times in recent years. Many of the cases involved unhappy students, and it is not difficult to see the ramifications of that. Teachers without tenure become fearful of anything that might upset students. According to P.D. Lesko, head of the National Adjunct Faculty Guild (as cited in Schneider, 1999):

[Adjunct] people are terrified of being rigorous graders, terrified to deal with complaints about the course materials, terrified to deal with plagiarists. A lot of them are working as robots. They go in, they teach, they leave. No muss. No fuss. (p.A19)

Two fairly recent studies give one final important reason for questioning the practice of colleges and universities relying too heavily on unfairly compensated part-time faculty. Harrington and Schibik (2001) found in a study of a large Midwestern university that freshmen who took a higher percentage of their courses with part-time faculty were less likely to persist toward their degrees. Jacoby (2006) found that graduation rates among community college students actually decrease as the proportion of part-time faculty hired increases. He contends that the causality of this finding is likely the “consequence of multiple disincentives inherent in current part-time faculty contracting” (p.1098) rather than lower or lesser qualifications. This finding could easily have consequences beyond the community college. In all cases, few incentives are given part-time faculty to foster relationships with students or become highly involved in their institutions.

Adjuncts Who Do Not Feel Abused

The literature is beginning to give evidence of adjuncts that see their position as one of possibility rather than exploitation. Adjuncts with this viewpoint are still quite rare, but they generally are those who are interested in teaching online or at multiple institutions. For those with a great deal of ambition, it seems possible to earn a good living as an adjunct, where there is no research or service component to their jobs.

Examples of adjuncts who make a good living do exist. Dr. Ruth Achterhof of Michigan earns about \$90,000 per year teaching online courses for a number of institutions (Carnevale, 2004). As a virtual adjunct, she works completely out of her home and has more work than she can handle. Dr. Jill Carroll earned a Ph.D. in religious studies at Rice University but was unable to find tenure-track employment. She decided the systemic change needed to fix higher education was not going to happen soon enough for her, so she embraced the possibility of adjunct work. In 2000, by teaching for a number of institutions, Dr. Carroll earned over \$54,000 (Smallwood, 2001).

While the foregoing examples present possibilities of better lives for adjuncts, what of the students they teach? When part-timers are splitting their time over many different schools or areas, they are going to be teaching hundreds of students. For those not teaching online, getting around to several institutions requires a lot of driving time, which limits the amount of time spent on any one campus or time given to work. In either situation, it would be difficult to offer one-to-one assistance or mentoring to students. Teaching quality may be compromised by the sheer numbers of students.

Conclusions

We believe that most adjunct faculty initially accept their positions with conviction and excitement, simply because they love their subjects, love to teach, and are concerned about students. Higher education sees it this way as well. A provost at one of the institutions studied by Gappa and Leslie (1993) compared adjunct faculty to “fine wine at discount prices” that can be “poured down the drain” if there are any flaws at all (p.141). Even though most of the literature finds adjunct faculty well qualified, committed, and conscientious about their jobs, having marginal status with permanent faculty and programs (even while having full status and expectations from students) is eventually going to result in disenfranchisement among them. Besides eventual feelings of anger, unhappiness, and lack of motivation, adjunct faculty have few opportunities to keep abreast of developments in their fields without interaction among full-time colleagues or motivation to read scholarly articles and journals. This disconnect between part-time and full-time positions can create serious problems.

The fact that this culture of “haves” and “have-nots” still exists as a rooted and accepted part of the American system of higher education seems very ironic to us. In the last 40 years, our universities have opened their doors to all manner of students and have attempted to put them on equal playing fields, regardless of their social, economic, or ethnic status. They have sought to bring and promote diversity into the mainstream of students’ everyday experiences. To be accused of marginalizing or disempowering any group, whether it be women, children, gays, the elderly, the handicapped, or any religious or ethnic minority, would be considered heinous to most institutions of higher education.

And yet, is that not exactly what is happening across the country to the group known as adjunct faculty? To be referred to as fine wine that can be “poured down the drain” if there are any flaws would make it seem so (Gappa & Leslie, 1993, p.141).

The two tiers of instructors in our colleges and universities bring to mind Abraham Lincoln’s famous saying, “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” Given that half the total professoriate in this country now works part-time, is American higher education headed down a dangerous path? Even if it is not headed for total downfall, what is going to happen to the quality of education that American students need and deserve? There is only one solution: eventually there has to be greater parity between full-time and part-time instructors. It might be necessary for adjunct faculty to have heavier teaching loads in absence of their commitment to research and service, but they still should be compensated more in line with their educational and professional accomplishments. This holds true for both salaries and benefits, as well as opportunities for growth and personal satisfaction. It is generally true that what people earn in a paycheck is a fair indicator of how they see themselves valued by society and how they tend to perform in their jobs.

Higher education is currently struggling with declining resources, so economic parity may be slow to establish. Yet, much can be done without financial constraint to immediately stop the inequitable treatment of part-time faculty and make them feel more invested in their departments and institutions. Simple improvements in employment conditions can motivate adjuncts to continue to perform well. Several writers referred to these moves as simply more complete integration of part-time faculty into their organizational cultures (Banachowski, 1997; Ellison, 2002; Gappa & Leslie, 1993; Parsons, 1998). The practices suggested for integration include such steps as providing orientation and mentoring for adjunct faculty, conducting annual formal evaluations, developing mechanisms for recognizing adjuncts’ accomplishments, offering professional development opportunities, including adjuncts in social functions and on some committees, involving them in curriculum and textbook decisions, and simply showing respect and appreciation.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, adjunct faculty might presently be the invisible underclass of American academia, but in this day of accountability the situation cannot maintain itself. For the sake of the future of higher education, it should not be maintained. The need for the talents and energy of part-timers is more than likely going to increase, so it is imperative that all institutions understand the adverse effects of excluding such a large portion of their instructional faculty from the mainstream and the critical need for change. Higher education has endorsed substandard compensation and working conditions for adjunct faculty, and it is going to have to find a way to remedy the situation (Ellison, 2002). Only when both full-time and part-time faculty members everywhere work together and see themselves as valuable members of one team will this country reach its goal of academic excellence.

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