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Adjuncts and the Chimera of Academic Freedom

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Cover Page Footnote

The term "adjunct" faculty will include non-tenure-track faculty, both as part-time temporary employees and as part- or full-time employees with fixed term contracts. Different institutions may use one or more of these terms to designate specific categories within their own hiring systems, but in general "contingency" applies across these levels. I am grateful to Dr. Henry Reichman of AAUP and Professor Emeritus at California State University East Bay for inviting me to address this topic, and for his encouragement of its further exploration. Thanks also go to the Faculty Association of California Community Colleges for its active promotion of full equity and inclusion for adjunct faculty statewide.

Adjuncts and the Chimera of Academic Freedom

Deirdre M. Frontczak¹

“Do adjuncts have academic freedom?” At first glance this may seem like an obvious non-issue: Who would respond that no, our institutions oppose academic freedom for adjuncts; our senates and unions (if we have them) protect only the rights of the tenured or tenure-track faculty? Adjuncts and lecturers play a vital role in the campus community, as we are often reminded; we are accomplished professionals, valued instructors, mentors for students, and key partners in the governance of the institution.

But a recent conference on Labor Relations and Collective Bargaining in Higher Education² posed this very question. And in preparing to speak at that session, I found myself exploring the matter from angles I had not fully considered before. In fact, it seems that despite resounding affirmations from administrators, and perhaps also from faculty colleagues, the real-world experience of adjunct faculty may fall far short of those aspirational goals.

So, What Exactly Is “Academic Freedom”?

In its foundational documents, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) defines three basic rights to which all college faculty should be entitled: “Freedom in research and in the publication of results, freedom in the classroom in discussions of their subjects, and freedom to speak or write freely ‘as citizens, members of a profession, and officers of an educational institution’ on matters of public or institutional concern.”³ The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) states that the principle of academic freedom “is based on the idea that the free exchange of ideas on campus is essential to good education.”⁴

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² National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education and the Professions, December 2019, [1] co-sponsored by the California State University and the Community College League of California (CCLC), and Sloan Sakai Yeung Wong LLP.

³ Henry Reichman, *The Future of Academic Freedom* (2019), Johns Hopkins University Press, p. xiv, citing from the 1940 AAUP statement.

⁴ American Federation of Teachers: <https://www.aft.org/position/academic-freedom>. Retrieved November 28, 2020.

These statements were originally written to describe and preserve the freedoms of a faculty formed in the full-time tenure-track model. Since that time, AAUP, AFT and other faculty associations have published statements asserting the equal rights of adjunct faculty⁵ to speak, teach and write free of undue political or administrative constraints. Yet the college landscape of today looks quite different from that of 100, 50 or even 25 years ago, when such rights were articulated. At most institutions, part-time non-tenure-track faculty are no longer “adjunct”—connected or added to something in an auxiliary way—but a vital component, and often a majority, of those teaching at a given institution. Virtually every administrator describes them as integral to fulfilling the mission of the college. Yet, to test this collegiality, let’s pose a scenario:

Suppose next week your college president were to announce that, while upholding the principles of academic freedom, budgetary constraints oblige her to take drastic action. Effective now, we are suspending all tenure, sabbaticals, and funding for professional development (conferences, workshops, discipline-focused events). And of course, no dedicated funds for scholarly research.

Suppose that healthcare and leave benefits are suspended, but faculty are encouraged to apply for the policies offered under Affordable Care Act rules in our state.

Suppose that teaching observations and research review by discipline peers will be ended, replaced by efficient, quantitative SETs (student evaluations of teaching) after each course.

Suppose mentoring programs are dissolved, departmental meetings by invitation only, governance open to a chosen few, and from now on, Deans, Chairs and Coordinators have sole discretion in assigning courses—which, how many, and when to offer them—and whether office space is available for student support.

Oh, and all salaries are now factored on an hourly or per-course basis; service and research are expected, but unfortunately cannot be paid. But remember: We value your contributions, and wish you every success in your work. We encourage you to tackle tough questions, to push the boundaries of learning, to write and publish on your own (and for some, your compensation, promotions and retention may depend on them). We can no longer fund those structures, but as an enterprising scholar, you will surely find ways to make this work. Outside consulting or a spousal job, perhaps?

⁵ To be precise, here “adjunct” faculty will refer to those hired on a non-permanent (contingent) basis, typically for part-time teaching but sometimes carrying a full-time course load, and generally paid on an hourly or per-course basis. They are not considered full, salaried employees and thus lack the full rights and benefits that typically accompany such positions.

What Might Be the Impact of Such Factors on Your Academic Freedom?

In this environment... Are you now empowered to design innovative classroom approaches? To take controversial stands in the classroom, or hold students to rigorous standards? To protest abuses on campus or beyond, potentially alienating a current or future Chair? To join a political group consistent with your own expertise, possibly bringing adverse publicity to the school? To fly cross-country or overseas to attend a top conference or seminar in your field?

For adjunct faculty, this scenario will not seem far-fetched; for most, it is already the norm. Yet even hinting at such changes campus-wide would evoke cries of outrage from every one of our full time colleagues, not to mention unions and Senate advocates, rendering those regressive changes unthinkable. Absurd. And, were they possible, from an institutional standpoint such actions would be fiscal suicide. Our professional standing would plummet. Our leverage to attract and retain good faculty would crumble. The perceived value of our degrees would tank. Students would find other options—not only because of declining student-faculty connections, but for the sheer injustice of subjecting an entire community of learners and scholars alike, to the stark and simplistic rules of a market economy.

But if these are precisely the conditions under which at least half – in some colleges, three-fourths—of our college faculty are now employed⁶—where is the outrage? Where is the solidarity behind colleagues whose degrees, publications and experience are in many, perhaps most cases equivalent to our own? Where are the demands for economic security, professional growth, benefits and pay parity for colleagues who have spent years or decades within our campus walls? Why are so many faculty who occupy more privileged ranks, not raising an alarm about the drastic impact that a two (or multi-) tiered system must have on the life and future of the university as a whole?

As an adjunct faculty member of 25+ years, having taught at multiple two- and four-year, public and private institutions, the lack of solidarity in so many campus environments has been disappointing at best, heartbreaking at its worst. It was bewildering to find that mentoring and development pathways eagerly extended to full time colleagues, were closed to adjuncts – the most vulnerable faculty, who arguably needed them most. It was astonishing to learn that tenure-track colleagues could apply for and receive advancements translating to increased ranks and compensation for ongoing professional attainments, when my own growth was maxed out upon

⁶ National Center for Education Statistics, “Characteristics of Postsecondary Faculty,”

https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_csc.asp. Updated May 2019. Retrieved January 19, 2020.

“In fall 2017, of the 1.5 million faculty in degree-granting postsecondary institutions, 53 percent were full time and 47 percent were part time. Faculty include professors, associate professors, assistant professors, instructors, lecturers, assisting professors, adjunct professors, and interim professors.”

arrival due to possession of experience plus a terminal degree. It was stunning to discover that some fully salaried, permanent colleagues were competing with me for course assignments – “overload” for them but for me, a key portion of a fractured, patched-together income. And it is deeply disheartening to encounter the frequent, careless comments from those who fail to recognize that decisions of hiring, evaluations, scheduling and countless policies and practices have profound, life-altering impacts on faculty who spend years in scholarship and teaching but, for myriad reasons have yet to access that elusive tenure-track “prize.”

Adjuncts: Perceptions vs. Reality

One possible factor is that perceptions simply have not caught up to current realities of contingent faculty employment. For example:

- Many see adjuncts as “extra” faculty, brought in to fill supplemental roles. Yet at present between 60-75% of college faculty members nationwide are employed in non-tenure-track positions. A Congressional report, *The Just In Time Professor*,⁷ estimated in 2014 that there were over one million contingent faculty in the U.S.; five years later, that number has likely grown. In almost all cases, adjunct faculty labor helps sustain the salaries of both administrators and tenured /tenure track colleagues; yet they receive significantly lower comparative pay for comparable work, limited or no access to benefits, and in many cases apathy or worse from their tenure-track colleagues.
- Some view the primary role of the adjunct as filling a temporary need. But according to the [Coalition on the Academic Workforce](#) (2012),⁸ more than 80% of adjuncts have taught at that institution, in that role, for three or more years; more than 30% for 10+ years. These numbers suggest that contingent, part-time hiring has become an ingrained business practice, offering flexibility to trim faculty and spend on other administrative or non-instructional costs – or, to cut classes when other needs arise.
- Colleges point to tightening budgets and competing demands as constraints on full time hiring. But, in *Inside Higher Ed*, Colleen Flaherty reported (2014)⁹ that between 1976-2011 the ranks of senior administrators grew by 141% , and of full time tenure-track faculty by just 23%. In that same period, part-time positions increased by 286% and full

⁷ House Committee on Education and the Workforce. *The Just in Time Professor: A Staff Report Summarizing eForum Responses on the Working Conditions of Contingent Faculty in Higher Education*. U.S. House of Representatives. (2014)

⁸ Coalition on the Academic Workforce, “A Portrait of Part Time Faculty Members: A Summary of Findings on Part Time Faculty Respondents to the Coalition on Academic Workforce Survey of Contingent Faculty Members and Instructors.” (2012)

⁹ Colleen Flaherty, “Professor Pay Up 2.2%.” *Inside Higher Ed*. (April 14, 2014)

time, non-tenure-track faculty by 259% during that same period. And that data extends just to 2011. Current data suggest that those gaps have only widened.

- Adjunct faculty are often seen either as young scholars beginning a career, or as non-academics employed in another field but teaching occasional classes. And some are. But Kerry Danner (2019)¹⁰ reports that 70% of such faculty are professionals over 40, with 30% aged 55-69. About half teach one or two courses at a single institution, but 22% teach three or more classes at multiple institutions. In a 2012 poll, 73.3% reported they viewed teaching in higher education as their primary occupation. About 50% say they would prefer full time, permanent teaching work. An additional 10% say they would like a full time but non-permanent instructional load.
- If and when full time faculty positions do open, these are rarely offered to an adjunct with a proven track record in that department. Hank Reichman of AAUP reports (2019)¹¹ that the longer an adjunct serves in that role, the less likely s/he is to be perceived as a serious, accomplished colleague and hired into a tenure-track position, with women significantly less likely than men to transition into full time tenure-track roles. (In other fields, senior employees are evaluated in part on the career advancement of their junior colleagues. In academe the opposite seems to prevail: the burden of proof falls on the adjunct to convince home-field colleagues that s/he is more worthy than any possible candidate they might find in the state, the country, or for that matter, the globe.)

And on the Matter of Gender in the Two-Tiered System...

- Compared with overall faculty, contingent faculty disproportionately identify as female. Karen Peterson-Iyer (2019)¹² reports that while a majority of college students are now female, with women comprising more than half of new Ph.D.s, women constitute fewer than 42% of tenure-track faculty, and just 25% of full time professors. And, women comprise more than 57% of the adjunct / lecturer ranks. Viewed from another angle, 76.1% of total female faculty are in non-tenure-track positions (vs. 65.9% of their male counterparts).

Of course, women are often reminded that their teaching status is a result of choices—to marry and move (or remain) with a spouse, to raise children, to care for elderly

¹⁰ Kerry Danner, "Saying No to an Economy that Kills". *Journal of Moral Theology*, Vol. 8, Special Issue No. 1 (2019), 26-50.

¹¹ Henry Reichman, *The Future of Academic Freedom* (2019). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

¹² Karen Peterson-Iyer, "Contingency, Gender and the Academic Table," *Journal of Moral Theology*, Vol. 8, Special Issue No. 1 (2019), 92-114.

parents at stages in life when their own professions would benefit from taking center stage. But as Peterson-Iyer notes, the deep relational instincts of many women cannot be viewed as simply another lifestyle option (similar to, say, tennis or gourmet cuisine), but as a deep-seated experiential truth—a perspective and a voice that colleges would do well to preserve.¹³ Karen Cardozo (2017) echoes this point, noting that the same caring instincts that lead women to sacrifice advancement for the sake of familial priorities are often accompanied by a deep-seated ethic of care. These values are expressed in a seemingly non-rational commitment to students and to service that leaves them vulnerable to increased exploitation.¹⁴

- AAUP reports that it is significantly more difficult for women to move up the academic ladder if they have children, and thus women are vastly underrepresented in leadership positions in higher education. This marginalization is reinforced by the demands of spousal careers and aging parents—demands that fall much more often on women academics than on men. Is it any wonder, then, that the prevailing expectations in academic life tend to reflect the priorities and values of predominantly male leaders, with little focus on ensuring that the insights and contributions of women are equitably encouraged, rewarded, and advanced in the campus community?

Again as Peterson-Iyer observes, absent the voices and experience of women, the tenure track serves to perpetuate a particular model of academic success – one predicated on the primacy of individual interests, geographic mobility, and the support of a stable and reliable partner or spouse to keep daily life running in the background. An individualistic ideal difficult to maintain for women with family obligations and ties. Ironically, while women are expected maintain the domestic and care-giving stability of their homes, as adjuncts this role too becomes compromised: They are even more likely to be mobile, have far less economic stability, experience little predictability in their schedules, and are often juggling work at two, three or more campuses, often in the same semester. A poor recipe for family *or* professional satisfaction and success.

¹³ Peterson-Iyer, Op. cit.: “Contingent faculty have no corner on truth, but contingent faculty do have a point of view that is uniquely shaped by the very circumstances that have led them to contingent positions... We must begin valuing contingent faculty in part for their unique contributions, contributions that are essential to advancing our fullest understanding of what it means to be a just and wise society.” (107)

¹⁴ Cardozo, “Academic Labor: Who Cares?” *Critical Sociology*, Vol. 43 Number 3 (2017), 415. “The administrative restructuring of faculty has mobilized both the cultural norms which devalue social reproduction and the persistence of those who provide care nonetheless... The ‘irrational’ commitment of non-tenure-track teaching faculty, or ‘illogical’ commitment to service by some tenure-track faculty, becomes easier to understand when we view them as care workers who maintain strong intrinsic motivation despite insufficient extrinsic rewards. While adjuncts are often advised to ‘just leave’ under exploitative circumstances, the care literature suggests deeper and socially beneficial incentives at work that we would do better to reward than to dismiss.”

In recent years private-sector businesses have increasingly wrestled with ways to eliminate invisible hurdles impacting women. During this time, academic institutions have become more sensitized to the marginalization of many groups—ethnicities, the disabled, veterans, and various “non traditional” students. Why then are we blind to the marginalization of women within our professional ranks, and to the loss of their perspective in shaping the interests and priorities of our departments, and the governance decisions of our universities as a whole? Why do we persist in viewing the scarcity of female professors as a matter of insufficient ability, commitment or scholarly ambition?

And women... What impact does this trend have on your own academic freedom? Are you more empowered as a professional today, than you were when you first set out on your academic path? Do you see a realistic prospect of having your scholarly dreams fulfilled?

As I write this article, as a longstanding (and I hope, valued) adjunct at a well-respected university and an outstanding community college, I am continually mindful of the precarious position of my own employment. Will a colleague, reading this, take exception to a statement and decline to work with me on a program or course? Will an administrator look askance at these observations and see a reduced need for my services? Will current prospects be limited by controversial remarks or an uncomfortable truth, and if so, would I find academic employment elsewhere? Thankfully, I believe that most of my colleagues genuinely embrace the commitment to social justice—to a humane, just and sustainable world—that lies at the heart of our academic mission. Still, for a decades-long adjunct... those nagging questions remain.

The Commodification of Education: Unintended Consequence or Strategic Design?

From the facts above it seems clear that the practice of hiring ever more contingent faculty, whose compensation, advancement and institutional power are continuously at risk, is more than an accident. To put it bluntly, it is an economic feature of strategic planning—not a bug. But perhaps this new model is the foundation on which the new “business” of higher education is intended to rise? Perhaps this entrepreneurial, competitive model is increasingly proposed not as an aberration but as the new, real-world future of academic life?

In business news we read daily about the expanding gig economy, and the prevalence of just-in-time hiring (and firing) as a means to maximize resources and minimize costs. True, gig workers have personal flexibility, but at the cost of economic stability, benefits, and a solid professional future. And an unspoken “value” of this economy is the flexibility for *employers* to evade long-term relationships with, and responsibilities toward, workers from whose efforts and talents they gain. As this trend has grown over the last four decades, wage and wealth inequality

has spiraled at a dizzying rate. We observe this trend, we lament it as a condition of the current market economy; but we fail to recognize its impact in our own professional and academic lives.

In point of fact, the business of higher education has embraced a trend toward splintering a complex professional role into scholarly, teaching and service activity, with the majority of core teaching (and often service) duties once carried by tenure-track faculty shifted increasingly to a devalued, second-tier class. Karen Cardozo again notes the parallels between teaching and other interactive—and largely feminized—care work, arguing that “in higher education... there is an inverse relationship between who cares and who advances.” And, she continues, “The division of research/teaching labor highlights a parallel divide within the professoriate between those who care less, and those who ‘only’ care.”¹⁵ In some institutions, the antidote to this divide is simply to caution aspiring academics to avoid “too much” service or lower-division teaching. But, Cardozo proposes, “a contemporary feminist perspective might argue instead for the increased valuation of care work in academe: making it *count* for hiring, retention and promotion, and rewarding it accordingly.”¹⁶

This increasing division between the “care” work of teaching and the more highly valued, “maculinitist” aspects of academic work have contributed to a growing dis-identification of many tenure-track faculty from the adjunct majority. As a result, it becomes increasingly difficult for senior, full time faculty to see adjunct issues as their own, or to notice how the devaluation of teaching effectively undermines the foundation of scholarship, learning, and academic freedom as a whole.

In many if not most institutions, the current system of tenure-track vs. contingent faculty—or, of research vs. teaching scholars—has not strengthened collegiality but rather fostered an unhealthy competition, while keeping an underclass of adjuncts from knowing and fully exercising their academic rights. Moreover, a lack of funding for adjuncts to take part in the work of leadership and governance only reinforces their marginalization within, or even exclusion from, the full academic community, while limiting the impact of their collective voice. In the gig economy, the model of faculty as a community of self-governing scholars is gradually replaced by one of rival entrepreneurs. And the system imposes pressures at both ends of the scale: Citing research by Derek Bok of Harvard, Jim Keenan notes¹⁷ that in the past 25 years, the average hours spent by tenured professors in teaching has sharply diminished: “This reduction arose as a tradeoff for increased demands on tenured faculty to publish and to handle more

¹⁵ Cardozo, Op. cit. 413.

¹⁶ Ibid. 416

¹⁷ Keenan, James. “A First Case for University Ethics: The Adjunct Faculty.” In *University Ethics: How Colleges Can Build and Benefit from a Culture of Ethics*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield (2015), 37-56.

administrative tasks.” So as adjuncts are less financially secure, their tenure-track colleagues are ever more squeezed with pressures to perform, as the academic freedoms that we all cherish are eroded at both ends. Michael Berube and Jennifer Ruth argue in a similar vein¹⁸, concluding that in order for freedom and professionalism to flourish, “the privileged must set aside indifference to the plight of their peers.”

This Rat Race Is Not What Colleges and Universities Were Meant To Be

One could say that every university, by virtue of its nonprofit status and mission, aims to strengthen knowledge and shared values, and to serve as a force for positive social change. Indeed, Kerry Danner argues¹⁹ that by buying into this business model—by outsourcing staff, creating a two-tiered faculty system, and offering low-paying and unstable work for many to sustain relative comforts (but often, greater pressures) for a few—our colleges undermine not only their own mission, but their credibility as a force for social justice and moral standards within the wider community.

Peterson-Iyer suggests²⁰ that a serious challenge to this model will require not just the presence of contingent faculty at the academic table, but a willingness of their tenure-track colleagues to stand up for and magnify their voices – an act of open solidarity with their more vulnerable colleagues. Or as Keenan puts it²¹, the challenge of contingency calls for solidarity on the part of tenure-line faculty toward adjunct colleagues, including advocating for substantive change, and more importantly, “finding a way of recognizing the adjunct faculty not as outsiders, but as one of us.”

Institutional leaders too must share in this challenge. Administrators, trustees, and for public colleges, legislators play a key role in creating or stifling the culture of free inquiry that our students expect and deserve. When budgetary dollars rest on the number of passing grades or credentials awarded, academic freedom declines. When faculty promotion relies solely on SETs—the professor’s equivalent of student “likes”—academic freedom suffers. When courses are assigned or withdrawn on the basis of donor or legislator priorities, learning and scholarship decline not just for teachers, but for the entire campus community. Academic freedom is more than a privilege won by a select few; it is the lifeblood of learning, a fundamental bulwark

¹⁸ Berube, Michael and Ruth, Jennifer. *The Humanities, Higher Education and Academic Freedom* (2015), Springer. Cited in Reichman, Op. cit. 46. “With the erosion of the professionalism once institutionalized by the tenure system, the university community has not blossomed into a vibrant democracy but reverted to the kind of demeaning and resentful culture typical of patronage systems.”

¹⁹ Danner, Op.cit. 34.

²⁰ Peterson-Iyer, Op. cit. 106.

²¹ Keenan, Op.cit. 55.

against the encroachment of financial, political and cultural pressures that threaten all scholarly pursuit. When academic freedom and full participation of all faculty are threatened, the excellence and honesty of our students' education is compromised – and once compromised, may take years if not decades to restore.

Conclusion

In view of the many complex factors that influence decision-making in public and private higher education, it is highly unlikely that adjunct hiring will disappear any time soon. So perhaps the question we must ask is not whether adjuncts now have academic freedom, but what is required for those faculty who are hired primarily as teachers and mentors, to be fully acknowledged for the contributions in scholarship, service and research that help sustain their programs and institutions and programs? What will it take for those faculty to be fully accorded the collegiality, openness and professional dignity that their tenure-track colleagues enjoy? And what must we do to ensure that *all* faculty, of all ranks, have full access to the freedoms of speaking, writing and action that are central to our academic tradition, and to our students' intellectual, professional and personal growth? The answers to those questions may hold the key to the quality of education we leave to the next generation.

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