

# Chapter 10. Ignorance Is Bliss

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Let me preface this by saying, I could lose my *jobs* for writing this chapter.

– Ann Wiley

When an institution silences the voices of almost 50 percent of its faculty, even well-intentioned individuals will unknowingly create an uncomfortable work environment. There is a danger in dehumanizing and excluding adjuncts from conversations that ultimately affect the quality and integrity of higher education. This chapter explores the seemingly blissful ignorance in higher education decision-making that results from an absence of adjunct perspectives, and it explores this tendency from three different, yet overlapping, views: students, full-time faculty, and administration.

## View I: Student Awareness

What do college students really know about the differences between the full-time and part-time faculty, and how does it ultimately affect their course selection and cost of education? The secret has been out for a while now: “Both two-year and four-year colleges are particularly heavily reliant on short-term non-tenure instructors, which comprise 75 percent of all faculty in two-year colleges and 39 percent of all faculty in four-year colleges” (Ran and Xu 42). This decades-long trend in higher education has led to a rise in adjunct unionization across the country, drawing more attention to the poor working conditions and making more students aware of the volatile nature of many of their professors’ employment. With this knowledge, many students now have leverage over their own mentors.

With over 13 years of experience as an adjunct instructor, I was curious about undergraduate students’ perceptions and understandings of their part-time professors. In a recent casual interview, an undergraduate student currently attending the University of Pittsburgh who prefers to remain anonymous told me, “Across the various departments, students will typically take elective courses, which are often taught by adjunct professors. Students usually suspect these classes to be easier, but they are frequently surprised when they realize the courses require just as much work as any non-elective course.”<sup>1</sup>

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1. Interview. Conducted by Ann Wiley, 26 Sept 2021.

After hearing this comment, I asked another student, unaffiliated with the first, who currently attends a private four-year college in another state about the perceptions of adjuncts at their school, and to my surprise and disappointment, their response was quite similar. My head was reeling with questions and concerns for the future of higher education. When students lose respect for their professors and try to cheat the system, doesn't this pose a major risk to the quality of higher education?

According to a study conducted in 2017 by the Center for Analysis of Postsecondary Education and Employment,

students on average received higher grades when taking courses with short-term non-tenure faculty, lower grades when taking courses with long-term non-tenure faculty, and even lower grades when taking courses with tenure faculty. In contrast to the positive results associated with contemporaneous course performance, however, both types of non-tenure instructors are negatively associated with students' subsequent course enrollment and performance, and taking courses taught by short-term non-tenure faculty is associated with the largest negative effects. (Ran and Xu 5)

Much to my dismay, the student rumors are often true about taking easier courses taught by adjuncts. As an adjunct myself who takes pride in my student outcomes, this is disheartening. According to this study, if students take introductory courses with adjuncts, they are more likely to get a better grade; however, they may not realize that they are also more likely to do worse in subsequent courses.

The strain and lack of support for contingent faculty who are employed on a temporary basis and have little to no job security may cause the reduction in the difficulty of course content or the relaxing of grading criteria to achieve better student evaluations. Whether an adjunct's semester-to-semester contract is renewed is often linked to the results of their student evaluations. In addition, adjuncts often are paid only for their time in the classroom, so any additional workload of course preparation and grading is unpaid labor. When part-time professors take on multiple classes at multiple institutions to make a living wage, the logistics of hours spent on classroom preparation must be divided up among multiple places of employment. There are only so many hours in the day.

Often adjuncts are hired for courses the same week that classes start with little to no paid preparation time. I was hired only a few days before the start of classes to teach two sections of a course I had never taught before. The full-time professor who normally taught the course was reluctant to share their instruction materials even though I was doing them a favor. I was expected to teach each section for \$1,800 total, before taxes, for the entire semester—at the drop of a hat. Pregnant at the time and commuting between two different schools, I put 10,000 miles on my car that semester. I even took an extra change of clothes to shower in between classes at one of the school gyms.

Fortunately, I was able to time both of my pregnancies for the end of the spring semester, so I didn't miss out on much pay, could recover over the summer, and could return to teach in the fall without losing my jobs. There is currently no job protection, let alone maternity leave, for female adjuncts who get pregnant at any of the schools where I have taught. To top it all off, my husband and I at the time were both contract workers and could not afford insurance, so we were also preparing to go into debt for the cost of childbirth. This type of treatment doesn't seem to match the new equity initiatives that my places of employment are touting.

With these working conditions stacked against me, how fair is it to compare my quality of teaching to that of a full-time professor? I rarely shared this story out of pride and for fear that I could lose my job if my truths showed up in a student evaluation. I have always felt that revealing to students how little I am respected will only lead to an even larger amount of exploitation. When students know how little their school values many of their adjunct professors, then they have leverage over many of their professors. Students may feel they have the upper hand in these situations, but the system is also cheating many of them in the long run.

Adjunct professors often have qualifications equal to or sometimes higher than full-time professors, and many adjunct professors work at multiple institutions in the same region at the same time. In 2010, the Affordable Care Act provided an opportunity for many adjuncts along with other Americans who were not provided access to insurance through their employers to obtain a healthcare plan. In this way, it was helpful, but in other ways, it made the life of many adjuncts even more challenging because it ended up dispersing their labor among campuses. Schools placed a limit on the workload of part-time instructors to avoid the mandate to provide healthcare benefits (Bachinger).

With this change, adjuncts who taught five courses at one school were now only able to teach two or three and therefore had to pick up classes at other campuses. Postsecondary schools in the same region share from the same pool of adjuncts. There is nothing stopping an undergraduate student from taking an identical course taught by the same professor at a community college for a fraction of the cost of the nearby four-year private university. Of course, the credits would have to transfer, but many neighboring schools often have articulation agreements to ensure an easy transfer. With a little research, students could save themselves a lot of money while still completing their degree at a preferred institution.

## View 2: Full-Time Allies with Strings Attached

With these adjuncts, it's like hiring a pulse.

– *Anonymous Full-Time Professor*

Full-time faculty members are often unintentionally insensitive to the situation of adjuncts due to the exclusion of adjunct representation in higher education. When adjuncts are not compensated for attending and therefore excluded from

department meetings and the decisions made in them, full-time professors are more inclined to pile on more workload for them, pass stressors onto them, and dehumanize their experience. Even more disturbingly, the higher education system encourages adjunct faculty members to remain silent for fear that speaking up, even when it is critical to do so, may cause retribution. This section includes specific examples from a variety of adjunct experiences of full-time faculty members inflicting microaggressions, scheduling conflicts, workload-exceeding contracts, and pedagogical research thefts, all of which create an unprofessional work environment for adjunct faculty.

Decisions made by the full-time faculty that directly impact the working conditions of adjuncts often intentionally dismiss or unintentionally exclude the adjunct perspective. Adjuncts are rarely invited or compensated to attend department meetings in which they have little to no governance power anyway. In the rare event part-time faculty members are asked for their input, they often remain silent or gloss over their true opinions to prevent any form of discontent among their employers.

For example, at one institution, I was asked to attend a meeting led by two full-time faculty members on how the methods and content of the course I was teaching were to be changed. Of the five people in the meeting, the two full-time professors, who had never taught the course, were instructing the three adjuncts, who had decades of combined experience, on how to teach the course. Although on the surface the full-time faculty members appeared to be asking for candid feedback, it was obvious they just wanted reinforcement of a decision they had already made. What should have been collaborative research among colleagues resulted in an uncomfortable, disconnected, dismissive work environment. Extreme power differences between the full-time faculty and contractual professors can disturb and inhibit work relationships and, consequently, undermine organizational effectiveness.

Even in these unfavorable conditions, adjuncts are expected to continue their own research to stay relevant in their field with little to no support to do so. A colleague of mine, who wants to remain anonymous for fear of retaliation, was given the “opportunity” to develop an online course. They had been an adjunct for several years and jumped on this practically unpaid opportunity in hopes that it would lead to something more (as many adjuncts do in hopes that hard work will lead to a full-time position that rarely comes to fruition). At this school, there was little to no compensation for building online courses and no guarantee of teaching the very course you invested time to develop.

After a summer of unpaid workshops and hundreds of hours spent designing and redesigning the course, my colleague was instructed over private texts to send the full-time professor the new and improved course for review. The adjunct complied to their superior’s request only to discover later that the full-time professor directly copied the course materials into their own section’s online portal to teach that semester. It turns out that the full-time professor was supposed to develop their own course over the summer but instead decided to steal my colleague’s

homework because they were too busy to do their own. Personal images from the adjunct's family had even remained in the copied stolen course! As if that weren't enough, the full-time professor went on to accept an award for the class based on their adaptable teaching skills moving content to an online platform.

My colleague filed an official complaint with the dean, which ultimately resulted in no punishment for the abuse of power and plagiarized material. My fellow adjunct was expected to continue to teach and just forget about this irreparable event. Even when adjunct voices are heard, they can be buried and threatened into submission. Voices that are silenced are no different than voices that were never heard.

When adjunct voices are nonexistent in scheduling changes that will directly impact their working conditions, the logistics of their experience often get lost on paper. The basic needs of adjuncts at a school where I teach were not considered when making a major course scheduling change. To accommodate enrollment increases, the department added more sections of courses by decreasing the times between sections down to merely ten minutes. On paper, this solved the enrollment problem by allowing another section of studio classes to take place in the room while also providing students with more enrollment options. Nobody thought or cared to ask how this would affect the adjuncts who would be teaching these back-to-back, 2-hour-40-minute courses with only a ten-minute break between them.

In ten whole minutes, I answer questions after class, use the restroom, go to my car (because during the pandemic we cannot eat in the building unless we have an office), remove my mask, sanitize my hands, eat lunch, put on my mask, rush to the room, and prepare for my next class to begin. Let me mention that I do not have keys to the room, so each day while sitting in my car, I have anxiety about leaving my personal laptop and other equipment in the unlocked, unattended room.

When I started working at this university, there was a designated adjunct office that required ID access that could be used to meet with students, eat lunch, or just store personal items. It contained a desktop computer that could be used to check email and shelves each adjunct could label with their name; on mine I kept my reference textbooks, copies of handouts, a mug for tea or coffee, and a reusable plate and fork for lunch. With each passing year, the room filled up with the department's supplies, and eventually the computer was removed. Then one fall, I returned to discover the room had been turned into a storage closet, and my teaching materials and personal items were gone.

When I asked for my books, I was told that they would be replaced if I needed them. I searched and found them on the bottom of a cart waiting to be thrown away. This seemingly simple act of reorganizing the workspace for the full-time faculty had inadvertently taken away the one small space that provided me security for my belongings and made me feel included as a faculty member. Nobody even gave it a thought. Why would they? How can you be aware of issues that may arise with adjuncts if there is no platform where they can share such issues prior to changes?

I love teaching and have applied to the *two* full-time positions that have opened in my region over the past 13 years without success. Full-time positions

have become rare, as universities replace full-time openings with multiple part-time positions to save money, thus perpetuating this vicious cycle of mistreatment. Most of my highly skilled adjunct professor colleagues have left higher education to teach at high schools or to take jobs in completely unrelated fields. I have a close friend who held the chair position in her department and just left to teach high school part time to escape the stressors of how unethical her higher ed job had become. Prior to her leaving, her department had been pared down to the bare minimum of only two full-time faculty members, including herself, to run the entire department comprised mostly of underpaid, overworked adjuncts.

Many full-time professors are allies to adjuncts, but that doesn't take away the imbalance of governance in the workplace. As Fernando Bartolomé and André Laurent explain, "Managers who worry excessively about offending their bosses are much less likely to defend subordinates when higher-ups deal unfairly with them." In turn, they note, "When subordinates sense that the boss won't defend them against unfairness, their morale will plummet, and they will withdraw commitment to the job." This lack of representation for adjuncts in higher education can cause ripple effects to job performance, morale, and devotion to one's workplace.

I want to believe that the full-time faculty don't realize what they are doing when they make these decisions, but the reality is that intentions don't matter when the outcome is the same. If adjuncts only have ten minutes between classes to talk to their full-time colleagues, there is even less time to hear any issues that may arise. There is no time to put a human experience to their name. It can be easier for the full-time faculty to ignore the enrollment caps on courses and not fight for equity when adjuncts aren't seen as colleagues but as "work horses," which is how a fellow adjunct once overheard a full-time professor refer to their part-time faculty colleagues.

### View 3: Ivory Tower Syndrome

Administrators often rely on information supplied to them through the chain of command. When the bottom of the chain stops at the full-time faculty, then adjunct faculty feedback is nonexistent in the eyes of administrators. When a large percentage of adjunct faculty remain silent or gloss over their experience for fear of losing their job, the full-time faculty relay biases and skewed or missing information about adjunct positions. "In the business world," notes Mark Graybill, Ivory Tower Syndrome "means less-competitive products that cost too much to produce and ultimately risking company survival." Higher education appears to be participating in this same self-destructive behavior—possibly without even realizing it. This section addresses situations that could be damaging for schools due to the missing link at the end of the chain of command.

The 2014 documentary *Ivory Tower* "reveals how colleges in the United States, long regarded as leaders in higher education, came to embrace a business model that often promotes expansion over quality learning" (Rossi). This semester,

my union representative informed me that an adjunct from another school was teaching 20 courses in one semester. To put that in perspective, a full course load in a semester is typically three to five courses. How is it possible to dedicate the time needed to provide excellent instruction when stretched so thin?

When one is hired as an adjunct, there is no official connection between the employer and the other schools of employment. There is nothing stopping adjuncts from teaching unlimited online courses at as many different schools as desired. Due to lack of communication among employers, the fear of getting caught diminishes because loss of one job will not affect employment at another. Misconduct could be running rampant in higher education, but nobody would know. Employees working in such a disconnected system have started to exploit the system in which they are being exploited. When part-time faculty members are given little respect or connection to their places of employment, then the same may be reciprocated.

According to Andrew J. Magda, Russell Poulin, and David L. Clinefelter, authors of a report on the 2015 surveys jointly conducted by The Learning House, Inc. and the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education Cooperative for Educational Technologies (WCET), “one out of 11 institutions do not require any essential training for online faculty” (18), including adjunct faculty. In addition, Magda and his coauthors found there is little consistency in the hiring process of online adjuncts; some schools used decentralized systems, some centralized, and some a combination of the two (11), making some departments completely disconnected from hiring the faculty who will teach online program courses. In addition, they noted “approximately half of the institutions . . . surveyed [did] not have written requirements regarding adjunct faculty members’ responsiveness to student communication and grading” (22).

At one place of employment, I developed an online course that eventually would come to be taught by other instructors. These instructors were hired by the online learning department, which had no background in the field of study and no ties to the department in which I taught the course originally. How could the online learning department ensure proficiency in teaching course content or in achieving outcomes when evaluating these instructors? There was little oversight of teaching except for student evaluations. Many students do not complain when passing with high grades. If institutions hire just anyone with a pulse who can facilitate a course and have no connection between employers, then how can adjuncts prevent themselves from being exploited by this type of system with such a large percentage of faculty as underpaid and disconnected to their place of employment? When schools take on more of a business model, then they are more concerned with money than the quality of product.

For many institutions across the country, unionization is providing representation and some improved working conditions for adjuncts. However, many schools pay top lawyers to prevent union effectiveness. Unions do not appear to be a permanent solution. I am currently on the bargaining committee for the new contract at one of my places of employment. We are fighting for compensation



for required training and online course development, both of which currently require unpaid labor.

The truth of how little we can accomplish with maximum effort is demoralizing and exhausting. The truth of the matter is that compensation for part-time instructors should be comparable in hourly earnings to that of similarly experienced full-time faculty members. Innovative contracts for part-time faculty members could benefit the schools and the students by providing the support and collegial community so greatly desired by many part-time adjuncts. The current system appears to be unsustainable. Students deserve better, especially with how expensive post-secondary education has become.

How did higher education get to this place of manipulation and disrespect for over 50 percent of the professionals who are providing the product that post-secondary schools are selling? Wouldn't it make sense for schools to hire more full-time faculty members to provide a secure work environment for all faculty to thrive and for students to be able to connect with their mentors on a sustained basis? When faculty members feel they easily could be replaced, it is much harder for them to remain committed and take pride in their place(s) of employment. If colleges want to approach education like a business, then they should implement long-term business strategies for success from the bottom up.

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