Chapter 16. From Being One to Hiring One: Both Sides of the Adjunct Phenomenon in Higher Education

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Background (Kim)

When I accepted my first teaching position, I had no idea what being an adjunct instructor would mean or that others like me were part of a larger, national conversation about contingent faculty, a group that at the time made up half of all faculty appointments in higher education (Backlund 6). In more recent years, others have claimed that the numbers are much higher and in need of more examination (Murray 235).

People presumed when I got a degree in writing that I planned to teach, but the idea of standing in front of a classroom of disinterested students turned my stomach. I even took my required public speaking course in a summer two-week session because in my mind I would never need to know a thing about speaking in public. Maybe you should remember that as you consider my advice.

I accepted a part-time position teaching one film studies course at a small, private college in Pennsylvania when the chair of the communication department called me into service at the recommendation of some kind professors from my graduate school days who must have seen something in me that I didn't yet see in myself.

Unlike most other contingent faculty, I did eventually move into the ranks of full-time teaching at the same institution where I began as an adjunct after realizing this was, in fact, the path I wanted to follow.

Fast forwarding to today, I'm still at the same institution. I now have a Ph.D., am the chair of my department, and teach a full load each semester in addition to doing administrative work. Perhaps, as Murray notes, every story is unique (237). Given what I've heard and seen from others, I'm not sure every story is this encouraging, but honestly, it's the only story I have to tell.

Background (Joanna)

Unlike Kim's story of unexpected origins, my goal to become a teacher stems back to kindergarten, when I lined up my baby dolls on the basement couch and pulled out the green chalkboard that flipped to a black chalkboard where I would teach them the lessons I had learned at school. My early exposure to a pedagogy of care

DOI: https://doi.org/10.37514/PRA-B.2022.1589.2.16

laid a framework for my later experiences as not only an instructor but also more specifically a female instructor in the collegiate environment.

Sara C. Motta and Anna Bennett remark that our education system is becoming increasingly neoliberal, emphasizing intellect over care and emotion. They also argued that for institutions to truly embrace diversity and inclusion, they must break the hold of careless "hegemonic masculinities" (631). Similar to what Motta and Bennett describe, I found in my educational experiences an emphasis on academic content rather than an emphasis on achieving a more emotional connection to students. It is perhaps my leaning toward this often feminized, unpraised, and under-preferred approach that made my journey more emotionally draining, challenging, and, I would argue, rewarding.

I continued my basement teaching ritual for many years, though increasingly less frequently, until sixth grade algebra when I worked out problems on the board trying to stop crying and start learning through teaching. Despite Mr. What's-His-Face making me come to hate those beautiful letters they shamefully mixed with numbers, he didn't squelch my passion for teaching. I earned a B.S. in writing and an M.A. in English before venturing out to the adjunct world.

Quite honestly, I did wander away from the teaching path for a bit, dreaming of becoming an editor at a publishing firm as I worked on my B.S. in writing, but after spending a year at home post-graduation being offered jobs as an editorial assistant in Boston and New York, along with contact numbers for other assistants who shared apartments with four others and were looking for a fifth, I realized it was a long, arduous journey of low-paying work with only a chance, albeit miniscule, that I would be able to make the big bucks. Instead, I decided I would teach at the college level.

In my media-induced fever, I dreamt of the floor-to-ceiling bookcases, the busts of Hemingway and Shakespeare sitting on a windowsill behind my enormous oak desk. That's where the job security and the comfortable living was, I thought. If you could all suppress your laughter for a moment, you know I'll soon get to the real story of my journey.

After earning my M.A. in English, I ventured out to the adjuncting world, looking for my impressive office anywhere I could find it.

Adjunct Life (Kim)

To say I had no idea what I was doing when I started as a part-time college professor would be an understatement. Those fourteen students in the advanced film theory course were about to face a stay-at-home mom who'd had no formal instruction or coursework in the field of education. And other than some basic technology instruction, I also had no formal training from the institution that hired me to handle the class either.

What I had was an advanced degree, though not a terminal one, and a willingness to jump into a situation for which I was woefully unprepared and given

almost no guidelines. Luckily, my students were kind and accepting and shared my love of film. In the year that followed, I taught a basic film course and a few sections of journalism, too.

My student evaluations were good, and my department chair encouraged me to create and teach a special topics film course. For all that I could tell, things were going very well. And what I didn't know about teaching or being an adjunct never bothered me—because I didn't know enough to be bothered. Now, in hindsight, I've gained the experience to be capable of fairly assessing how the institution treated me in this role of part-time instructor.

In speaking to adjuncts at other institutions, I discovered the pay I received for my work was somewhere between the middle and higher end of the scale. And because our department had recently split from the English department, there weren't many full-time faculty members competing for classes, which meant I got some say in choosing class times, though the courses were given to me regardless of my preference and skill set.

As for participating in faculty meetings, having a say in departmental decisions, receiving employment benefits, or even getting taken advantage of as so many other adjuncts have endured, I didn't realize I should be concerned with any of it. As Jeremy C. Young and Robert B. Townsend note, every adjunct has their own reasons for accepting the position, and while many suffer for this decision, nearly three-fourths of those they surveyed were "satisfied with the position overall." Given that evidence abounds that adjuncts often live at or below the poverty level (Quart), it is possible that those surveyed by Young and Townsend had spouses or others to support them, making their salary and overall institutional treatment less of a factor in their job satisfaction ratings.

In my case, I was grateful to have a job and presumed in my naivete that however I was being treated in that situation was normal and fair, though as Young and Townsend also point out, "acknowledging that non-tenure-track instructors are a highly varied group does not in any way minimize the problem of contingent labor." Still, from my perspective as a part-time professor, I didn't expect to be included in departmental or college-wide decisions, and with two small children, I was happy to avoid the additional time meetings would have taken from being home with them. Teaching was enough. I truly appreciated the opportunity. It never crossed my mind to wonder if my work was "valued" by the institution.

While I suppose you're hoping I'll say I know better now, I'm not sure that I do. I even asked a colleague recently about his adjunct experience at our institution, and he agreed that while the college isn't perfect, it does treat adjuncts well. That said, now that I'm on the other side of being an adjunct, I can see many ways we could do better for the part-time faculty who work to support our mission, our students, and our individual departments, often without much thanks. I will elaborate on this in the next section.

The full-time position that I was covering stayed open until the provost called me to his office and asked me to apply for it. After a year and a half of adjunct

work, I moved into a full-time position, and though I remained at the rank of "instructor" for several years, I did eventually become a full professor shortly after receiving my Ph.D. Then I assumed the role of interim department chair, and I officially took over as department chair a few years ago. And that means I can speak with some authority regarding my institution's treatment of adjuncts with a different level of insight than I've ever had before.

Adjunct Life (Joanna)

Unlike Kim's adjunct story, mine was more that of a dirty hippie's, traveling from school to school through the Pennsylvania winters in my less-than-reliable vehicle. I started my adjunct experience in the information systems department, actually, teaching people the parts of a computer—nothing fancy, more like "Hey, this is called a monitor," followed by pounding on the blackboard to demonstrate how to double-click a mouse. Informed by my many years working in our campus writing center that was adjacent to the computer lab, which, by geography, made all writing center tutors makeshift help desk employees, I wiggled my way into teaching the IT course that no self-respecting IT professor wanted.

After a semester of that, I began teaching English courses and, probably like many people reading this chapter, spent my semesters teaching for multiple institutions in multiple counties at all kinds of insane hours. One semester, I taught a 7:30 a.m. section in a high school before their regular school hours, traveled to a second county for two more classes, ate lunch, then traveled to a third school in a third county to teach another two sections, ending just shortly before 9:00 p.m.

In my life of a wandering adjunct, I lived out of my trunk. With materials for each class section in its own milk crate with hanging files, I attempted to keep my life organized and structured. Getting paid only to spend my salary on supplies and gas was never easy. I qualified for unemployment in the summers, though even teaching six sections a semester kept me under the poverty line. Apparently, this experience is not unique. In a 2020 report titled "An Army of Temps," the American Federation of Teachers notes, "One-third of respondents [to a survey of contingent faculty members] earn less than $25,000 annually, placing them below the federal poverty guideline for a family of four" (1).

In my case, teaching all these sections put me below the poverty level with no benefits. The experience made me humble, requiring me to learn to accept an undignified position for very hard academic efforts. Waiting tables on the weekends to make ends meet and pay my rent was demoralizing. How could I be working so hard for so little? Having to teach on so many campuses also meant no time to get to know people at any of the schools, really, which caused me to feel even more disconnected from my field and from life. Occasionally, I was able to attend a division meeting and feel like my face was being seen, but much of the time, I drove and drove and drove and graded and graded and graded. My one-bedroom ranch house had a makeshift office space, which was a fold-up table in front of the TV.

I guess I was naïve. I thought that being a college professor meant wearing cozy sweaters and sitting in my dark wood-paneled office with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves and a huge leather couch where students would come to visit me to talk about our latest reading from Foucault. In reality, if I had an office space at all, it was an empty metal desk shared by hundreds of others without even a key to the filing cabinet. We were mobile teachers without space, without a place, and without anything to call our own. It was definitely not how I imagined teaching college would be.

When I came to discover that I was actually in the majority, with about 60 percent of faculty members being adjunct at that time, I was even more floored. How was this possible? This lifestyle was beyond just challenging. It was a time in my life that made me question my goal to become a teacher. I often referred to this experience as academic hazing, waiting to earn the "letters" bestowed upon us as tenured professors.

However, I was lucky. My big break occurred two years later when I started a full-time adjunct position at a four-year university. I finally found out what it meant to be a college instructor. I shared an office with just one or two other people, which was magical. I attended weekly department meetings during which my voice was not only heard but also encouraged. I was able to join committees with others from different departments. I started to see the world on the other side of the tracks, so to speak. When I was treated as equally important in driving the department and campus, I felt important and listened to.

Quite honestly, many of the faculty members I worked with did not even realize I was adjunct. Once I had this position, with a salary and benefits, I was motivated to begin my Ph.D. program. I know, that sounds crazy, right? When I was continuing to live as an adjunct with a temporary contract and no guarantee of anything, why would I invest more time and energy into a degree I wasn't sure I could even use for a full-time job? As fellow adjuncts can attest, it is a calling, I suppose.

Working in one county, going to night classes in another, and living in a third made for a taxing two years of coursework, but I did it. I lived this routine through all my doctoral coursework. While ABD, I applied for tenure-track jobs and landed one! I quickly packed up and moved, feeling pretty lucky to be one of the chosen few, the 40 percent who made it out of the adjunct lifestyle. I have been at that job ever since, circa 2007.

Chair Experience (Kim)

Our department has consistently struggled with and been overburdened by the number of students we are trying to serve with only a few full-time faculty members. This means we rely on cross-departmental support from full-time faculty members as well as support from adjuncts who are professionals in another career field rather than part-timers looking for a full-time position. But I'd be lying

if I said we don't also rely on adjuncts who teach for us and at other institutions part-time as well, sometimes covering more classes in a semester than some full-time faculty members teach in an entire year.

Because my story in administration has consisted almost solely of survival for most of my tenure as chair, I admit to not being sensitive or considerate to the adjunct situation until very recently when one of my part-timers noted how close to the start of the semester he received his contract. Murray states that this kind of "job insecurity" is only made worse by a host of other issues (238). In light of this conversation, I realized that I was seeing only a small glimpse of a much bigger and possibly more frustrating problem.

Many, or maybe all, adjuncts tend to be treated as a disrespected afterthought in the grand scheme of semester planning. In his analysis, Murray reveals concerning situations in which contingent faculty are "sometimes treated as virtually invisible by some departments that take contingent labor for granted" (238). While we may not mean to do so, the point is that we are not considering all faculty as equals.

I hope that by starting this conversation with adjuncts about what they need and then taking those needs to the administration, we can begin to change this pattern on my campus. After the conversation with my colleague, I set forth to write a document to pass along to the administration. This "work in progress" included several concerns, such as late contracts and the "onboarding" of new adjuncts in regard to parking, computer use, and other matters that, as a full-time faculty member for a number of years, I now take for granted.

As I wrote, I realized something about my own experience that should have taken place but never did. If only I'd been mentored and trained regarding what to expect as a new faculty member, where to find what I needed, and who to ask for help, I might have been able to avoid some of the awkward and even embarrassing moments early in my teaching career.

Sure, being mistaken for a student isn't necessarily a terrible thing, but at the same time, it's difficult to expect respect or inclusion from colleagues who don't know you exist. And further, it's impossible to feel valued. Sadly, as William Pannapacker states, many faculty members do not feel "adequately valued," a problem that left him wondering whether he should leave academia altogether, and this as a tenured faculty member. It's shocking to note that, while the problems considered in this chapter begin in the adjunct realm, they are pervasive across every level of "success" in academe. Perhaps creating a consistent system of onboarding adjuncts and making them part of the structure of the institution will not only change feelings of isolation and being undervalued, but it might also begin a trend for all faculty members to feel relevant in their departments and institutions.

And that is my next endeavor as a department chair, a tactic I hope will eliminate or at the very least minimize the challenges of being an adjunct faculty member or even a new full-time faculty member at our institution. Currently, I've be-

gun writing a document listing and explaining common onboarding procedures with the goal of creating a consistent system for not only our department but also the entire college.

As I indicated earlier, I don't see our system as being ineffective, but that doesn't mean there isn't room for improvement. And, as Jessica Schreyer notes, "If enough people are engaging in these conversations, progress can be made toward excellent working conditions for all faculty" (98). Finding the issues within our system and working to address and improve them for our contingent faculty members is the least I can do in my role as an administrator. I'm happy to report that my dean is supportive and excited about the ideas and would like to work with me on it so that we can pass them along to the administration.

Chair Experience (Joanna)

My school relies heavily on adjuncts to fill our schedule. The ratio is sadly like many schools, with about 40 sections taught by our full-time faculty members and the remaining 60 sections taught by our adjunct faculty members.

I work for a two-year community college and belong to a department with 11 full-time faculty members and 54 adjuncts. The role I am in is of co-chair, an advocate for our faculty but not an administrative role in the traditional sense. My co-chair and I do not see ourselves as "in charge" of the department but rather as advocates for our faculty. In our department, co-chairs rotate every three years on a staggered schedule, always having an experienced chair in place as the new one rotates in. This creates a sense of continuity but also serves as a reminder that we are only in that role for a short period of time.

Serving as an advocate for 54 temporary, part-time, non-tenure-track faculty members, I realized that forcing them to teach fewer than 12 credits to avoid the institution having to provide them with healthcare insurance is inhumane. I know what it is like wondering how to pay the heating bill and sitting under piles of blankets grading papers late at night after having taught six classes over the course of 12 hours in three counties. I have been there. I want to be a better advocate, but how? My adjuncts are worth more than $792 per credit hour, especially when faced with a pandemic.

As I noted earlier, one of the biggest pieces to feeling my worth when I was an adjunct was feeling like I mattered, like my voice and presence were recognized. As a result, as co-chair, I have invited our adjuncts to come to committee meetings about our course outlines and book adoptions and to department meetings. I want them to know we appreciate their contribution, which translates to teaching nearly 100 sections a semester, more than double what our full-time faculty members are teaching but without the same professional and financial support, geographical landing space of an office, and daily interactions with other faculty members about our pedagogy, a dynamic I find so incredibly invigorating as a teacher.

In its "An Army of Temps" report, the American Federation of Teachers points out the finding that "faculty in contingent positions are often cut out of department and institution-wide planning, though they may teach the majority of some types of courses, especially in community colleges and at the introductory and developmental levels in four-year institutions" (7). When most of the faculty members on a campus are adjunct, why are they left in the margins when it comes to decision making? With that said, involvement is incredibly challenging on the adjuncts' end while they do that traveling from school to school and prepping along the way. Finding the time to commit to these involvements is not easy. I know that. Sometimes being in my role of co-chair is overwhelming, always remembering how hard their job is, but I will keep fighting.

Seeing more and more full-time tenured faculty members at my institution retiring and not being replaced, our statistic of adjunct to full-time faculty members are growing increasingly disproportionate. We must rely on adjunct faculty members and, therefore, must treasure their desire for inclusion. How do we do that?

Solutions (Kim)

I am not about to pretend that the small, private college where I work is a perfect place or that it has the answers to the challenges that likely will continue to be there for adjuncts. I also can't, and won't, say that stepping into the world of academia as an adjunct faculty member, whether as one with the intention of pursuing a full-time teaching position or as one who is content to stay in an adjunct role while working full-time in another profession, is a wise plan. However, I can say that there are some things to keep in mind.

I hope my story illustrates that there is hope in academia, but at the same time, I truly understand that my experience is rare and not without its flaws. My institution does not offer tenure, but instead yearly contracts, which to some could be seen as problematic.

Most adjuncts struggle to attain full-time, or even stable, employment in academia, and many never succeed. Schreyer states that her attempts to support contingent faculty members and improve working conditions at her institution fell short of addressing "the most critical issues facing contingent faculty, including pay, stability, and promotion" (84). Even with the involvement of individuals with a sensitive eye toward adjunct faculty members, solutions require institutional support that can be hard to achieve.

I understand and acknowledge the rarity of being one of the few to make the leap from the precarious adjunct world to the more stable, full-time one. To pursue full-time employment in academia means a lot of thankless hard work with no guarantee there will be any reward in the end. Because I entered the profession out of necessity with no intention of staying, it is possible that I didn't set myself up for disappointment. Perhaps that is a takeaway. Perhaps not.

After all, my recent foray into administration as a department chair came in the same way my teaching career did—without applying or pursuing the opportunity. And from the start, being chair has been fraught with drama and challenges for which I was largely unprepared. I'm not necessarily on an easier road, and in all this analysis, I didn't even touch on the difficulties of being a woman in academia, not to mention one who was under 30 years old when she took that first adjunct position. Those will have to be issues for another, different chapter in the future.

Most of my colleagues who have made the leap from adjunct work to full-time employment successfully have done so with a foot firmly planted in another career—something to fall back on. It's possible this was out of necessity with their financial situations or life plans, and in some cases the "other" career was a passion and came easily. This also might have allowed them the flexibility and courage to take the leap to academia with an awareness of that "Plan B" as a place to go back to should their adjunct work fall through.

While I'm not sure I'd necessarily do anything differently in my path to becoming a full-time faculty member and then chair of the department, having more support in my early years as well as a set of expectations for what this career would entail might have been helpful. As Wes Anthony et al. note, "The structure of most institutional systems [does] not provide a platform for these part-time teaching professionals to have any real voice on matters concerning the classroom, their teaching practices, training or decisions that apply to the departments in which they teach" (3). In light of this, it's likely that my problem is one that transcends my institution, and yet the solution is one that must start at that very level.

Anthony et al. continues, "Full-time faculty, especially those who serve as Discipline Chairs and in other adjunct supervisory roles, must promote Professional Development opportunities that involve adjunct faculty" (5). Like Anthony et al. suggest, I'd certainly have appreciated a "big picture" plan and a helping hand to navigate through contracts, difficult colleagues, and effective classroom management when I was an adjunct. Now, as a department chair, it is my role to offer such support to my contingent faculty members.

Schreyer's work and analysis illustrates something all department chairs should address, which is that if we work to understand the nuances of the specific contingent faculty situation at our institutions, we can work locally at improving those conditions (83-100). Schreyer states that her goal, and I would argue the goal of all department chairs, should be to "help create positive change" (90), and she also notes that if we "truly want high-quality programs, we must discuss not only the needs of students in those programs, but the needs of the faculty as well" (91). Her implied and understood meaning is that administration must understand the needs of not only our students but of all of our faculty members—tenured, non-tenured, full-time, and contingent part-timers—as well.

I can't change the path I took as an adjunct faculty member all those years ago, but certainly I can learn from my experience and use my position now to ensure inclusion for part-time faculty members. By taking small, purposeful steps to dis-

cover, articulate, and solve the problems facing our adjunct faculty, I can become part of what will hopefully be a trend in higher education to improve working conditions for all.

Solutions (Joanna)

My story is quite unlike Kim's in that I have always wanted to teach, never imagining much outside of academe. I was one of the ones Kim references who set herself up for disappointments. There were many of them, including the incredible hours without fair compensation as an adjunct: working 70- or 80-hour work weeks as a tenure-track and eventually tenured full professor at least comes with much better compensation than adjuncts receive.

While I would like to see a world of unionized adjuncts or a profession wherein 80 percent of courses were taught by full-time faculty members who receive reliable, respectful salaries and benefits, that does not seem to be the reality of life for most of academia. Instead, full-time instructors and professors must advocate for and include adjunct faculty members. We must also recognize the increasing trend of full-time lines being replaced with even more adjunct positions as full-time faculty members retire, saving the institutions money but putting departments that employ a large number of adjuncts at risk of losing their voices. Adjuncts matter to all of us, despite their $792 dollar per credit-hour salary they earn at my college.

My position as co-chair has afforded me the opportunity to advocate for my department's adjuncts in order to curate a more positive experience for them, which, in turn, will improve student and institutional success. Richard L. Wagoner, citing Wood and Hilton, offers "five paradigms that can be considered in ethical decision-making" that I believe apply to my role at my community college: an "ethics of justice" that asks us to make decisions that focus on "the good of the majority, the most good for the most people"; an "ethics of critique" in which we "question decisions that can and do reinforce inequities even if those decisions benefit the largest number of people and are based on accepted laws, policies, and procedures"; an "ethics of profession" that "focuses on the norms, practices, and guidelines of particular professions"; and an "ethics of local community" through which "decisions should be made contemplating the greatest good to the local community" (91).

It is incredibly difficult to advocate for the over 50 people working as adjuncts in my department when I have no real power to help with compensation and when I can only wish I could provide them with the opportunity I have to work full time with benefits, but I apply these ethical considerations to my decisions as co-chair for my department, which is comprised significantly by adjuncts, so that I can reinvigorate my department. What does that mean logistically?

College department heads need to include their adjuncts in committee work, including work on issues of curriculum development, student success initiatives,

and on-campus departmental promotion. Adjuncts should also be included in departmental decisions and meetings. Full-time faculty members need to actively mentor adjunct faculty members, helping them through their professional experiences. We need to advocate for inclusion of adjuncts in contract negotiations to improve their pay, benefits, and teaching schedules. These initiatives will improve adjuncts' sense of professional worth and self-worth. In turn, their attitudes, accessibility, and engagement with students on campus will improve.

Our departments will become thriving communities for students who will return to their studies so they can continue to see the adjunct faculty members who are their teachers. I would love to see the day when our department and division meetings are held in lecture halls instead of small conference spaces, filled with hundreds of adjuncts attending, talking, collaborating, and building relationships with our full-time faculty members. Building up adjunct faculty members emotionally, psychologically, and professionally is how we will begin to see their lives, our lives, our students' lives, and our institutions' lives all improve tenfold.

Rather than accepting the dystopian depictions of the future of adjunct life continuing like this or possibly getting worse, what can we do to make it a better world? As the burden of college enrollment turns on the shoulders of the taxpayers, as the dynamic of the college campus changes, and as the pandemic lingers on, driving more courses online, the cheaper adjunct workforce will always have work, but at what cost?

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