# Chapter 17. Adjuncting without Anguish: A 21st Century Roadmap to Success for Contingent Faculty

Devan Bissonette
Niagara University

"If you're here and other places," a program coordinator recently told me, "it's easy to put it into autopilot and [cut] corners, overwhelmed a little bit in what you're doing." The solution, he explained, was mandating a term off each year for all adjunct (contingent) faculty. This admin-splaining, said without evidence or logic—telling adjuncts the problem is them, not the system, and the solution is less work (making the situation worse, not better)—is the type of approach that causes so much of the low morale among the adjunct population in the academic world today.

According to the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), more than 60 percent of faculty members are non-tenure track ("Background Facts"). Today, 40 percent of adjuncts struggle to pay their bills, and about 1/3 earn less than $25,000 a year, and since the average salary for a class hovers around $3,500 and can be as low as $2,000 (Flaherty, "Barely Getting By"), an adjunct has to teach as many as 13 classes a year to rise above the poverty line (Schlaerth 6-7), which the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office of the Assistant Secretary of Planning and Evaluation defines as $26,500 for a family of four ("2021 Poverty Guidelines"). No wonder that as of 2014, about 90 percent of adjuncts were working at least one other job (Flaherty, "Congress").

Back in 2009, I was a full year into the academic job market search. As I was applying for yet another full-time job at an institution for which I didn't want to work in yet another place where I didn't want to live, I started to see academia in a different light, something more corporate, something less humane, something, at worst, soul-sucking. I knew I still wanted an academic career, but I wanted it on my terms, and that is when I started to consider adjuncting. While much of the focus on adjunct life understandably paints a pretty dim picture, there are ways to make a living and still get some satisfaction out of such a career path. In the following paragraphs, I hope to shine a light how one can make the adjunct life sustainable as well as reflect on how we as adjuncts can use our voice to help improve working conditions today and in the future.

## Strategic Adjuncting

Originally, adjuncting gave professionals in non-teaching fields a way to share their knowledge and experience while still retaining their positions in their re-

DOI: https://doi.org/10.37514/PRA-B.2022.1589.2.17 

spective careers, and it also gave graduate students a way to get their feet wet as teachers (Schlaerth 6). Today, though, adjuncts—the most high-risk faculty members in terms of pay and status—often are tasked with instructing at-risk students, who inevitably demand extra time and attention, and those increased demands on adjuncts already stretched thin trying to make ends meet lead to poor outcomes for students and faculty alike (Kezar and DePaola 32-33; McNaughtan et al. 12). While the pressures on adjuncts are unquestionably vast, I have found three key areas, detailed in the following, where some of the worst negatives adjuncts face can be turned into positives to carve out a meaningful career as contingent faculty members.

## Online, Asynchronous Teaching

Knowing that the cost alone of driving to multiple schools to teach wasn't sustainable on an adjunct's salary, I quickly found that asynchronous, online teaching allowed me far more flexibility to make my own schedule while managing other responsibilities. The growth of the for-profit sector has opened up plenty of such jobs (Proper 97-98), often with wages that outstrip those at more traditional colleges if one takes into account how much more frequently classes tend to run.

I have taught as many as 13 classes at a time to make ends meet, with children, older parents, and a myriad of other time pressures to balance simultaneously. Were it not for the flexibility of online, asynchronous teaching, there is simply no way adjuncting would be financially sustainable if I had to be in specific places at specific times.

## Pre-packaged Courses

This is perhaps one of the dirtier phrases in academia right now, as it takes academic freedom away from instructors in lieu of a common curriculum into which faculty members can be easily placed. The general impetus to that strategy, as one dean put it, is to make programs "lean and very responsive" (Roscorla), yet the little financial data there is throws into question whether this adjunct-heavy model is either lean or responsive (Ginsberg 125-160; Hearn and Burns 351-353).

If universities are convinced that wasting the subject matter expertise of adjuncts through this type of course design is the way to go (Kezar and DePaola 37), this opens an opportunity for adjuncts to focus on building rapport with students to best achieve course outcomes. When I am expected to teach a course that is ready to go as soon as I'm hired, I immediately focus on making the course my own in discussion, feedback, and announcements. This not only helps me focus my prep work, but it also addresses what students demand most from online faculty, a clear sense of presence (Nye 120). In an age in which one student review can close the door to future employment, focusing on students helps me justify to employers my continued adjunct employment and has proven time and again to

be a great way for me to show through positive student reviews in my application materials that I can make an employer's course designs work for students.

Another factor that makes pre-packaged classes look that much more attractive, aside from the constant fear of having a course you put a lot of work into designing canceled, is the idea that a class you design actually does you more harm than good. One university where I taught informed us that our classes, once designed, were its property and thus anyone could teach them (which later, in fact, happened to me).

At another school, when my class was shifted to a tenured faculty member—because full-timers couldn't fill up their own courses— I was told by this faculty member that she wouldn't be "teaching the course with the materials [I] had already loaded" and that her choice was "apart from whatever position the college is currently taking." Whether it's worth investing time and effort into designing a course that you might not end up teaching is worth considering.

### Distance from a Department's Epicenter

"The full-timers are meeting this Friday" to discuss the new syllabus plan for the course I was scheduled to teach, I was told by a department chair while writing this very article. "I'd prefer to get their feedback" before putting the new course design into place, the chair said. This type of conversation, where the input of part-timers is flippantly ignored, is one that adjuncts know well. Adjuncts not only can be structurally separated from their full-time counterparts but also can be separated physically by placing their offices away from the department's hub, and their place within a department's structure no doubt relates to the struggles of the adjunct to make ends meet (Finley; Prosper 106-107; Schlaerth 5).

According to a recent study, over half of faculty surveyed (full- and part-time) report issues with burnout and cite decisions by their administrations as a key point of stress; not coincidently, about the same amount report that more supportive decisions by higher-ups would reduce their current stress levels ("Faculty Wellness"), levels that have doubled since 2019 "Fidelity Investments").

At the almost dozen schools where I have taught, department drama has never been in short supply. Taking sides, especially against a department chair, rarely bodes well for contingent faculty. So, not only can distance make the heart grow fonder, it also can allow for space from departmental squabbling, making it far easier to avoid taking sides that could affect one's future employment—and it helps reduce stress as well.

## Finding Power in the Process

Finding ways around the realities of the profession to live sustainably are not just about adjuncts and their happiness, stability, and so forth. There is a huge trickle-down effect across academia. As one professor lamented, university administra-

tors often forget the reality that to achieve student success, you need the faculty and staff to be in a good place, too (Lashuel). The recognition that adjuncts' well-being is damaged because of their unequal treatment is certainly nothing new. About two-thirds of college senates lack any means for adjunct participation, and about half report no meaningful power for adjuncts in faculty governance, even indirectly. Coupled with the loss of control over syllabi, adjuncts are swiftly losing power in this new world order of higher education, and as well-meaning as full-time faculty members may be, adjuncts understand their situation in a way others do not, so lacking representation in university governance does matter (Finkelstein et al. 460, 485; Finley; Schlaerth 11). Yet, since adjuncts teach a majority of classes, they retain a huge, latent power over how colleges operate.

So, what can adjuncts do to improve the situation? Individually, options are limited, but here I think it essential that adjuncts remember that there is power in numbers and that they have a huge advantage there. Adjunct strikes or walkouts are one way to get attention, as they can grind a campus to a halt. Especially as teaching in higher education is increasingly viewed as a service profession, more and more unions have been willing to support adjuncts and their rights. Such backing from otherwise strange bedfellows such as the United Auto Workers and others provide adjuncts a key platform to present their concerns (Schlaerth 7-8).

There were 42 faculty strikes between 2012 and 2018, and adjuncts and full-time faculty participated in almost all of them (Duncan 504; Flaherty, "New Data on Faculty Strikes"). However, in the case of Wright State University, ads for "long term" adjuncts were put out in an attempt to break the strike there (Pettit), showing how easily adjuncts can be cast as enemies of the full-time faculty. On the other hand, there have been some recent successes using this collective approach that give credence to it as a tool to spark change. For example, faculty protests in New Jersey recently produced a $230 per-credit-hour bump in adjunct pay (Carrera).

Strikes may seem a bit extreme, but after years of inaction and indifference from administrators, it often takes something extraordinary to start to effect change. However, the contingent faculty simply being recognized as a bargaining unit within their colleges has shown positive results. At both Elon University and Ithaca College, recent decisions by arbiters have affirmed that adjuncts are in fact employees under the National Labor Relations Act and thus have a right to organize (Salvatore et al.). This development is important for adjuncts, as collective bargaining is critical in giving them power to do more than just take-it-or-leave-it with respect to contracts (Duncan 576-84).

Representation, of course, is about more than just portraying adjuncts as some amorphous blob of faculty that share the same characteristics. Race, class, and other individualized elements do much to frame the adjunct experience (Flaherty, "Barely Getting By"; Hesli and Lee). With non-tenure-track jobs on the upswing, these positions have become the dominant means to usher in more traditionally under-represented groups into teaching at the college level, particularly at two-year colleges (Flaherty, "More Faculty Diversity"; McNaughtan et al. 22).

While the growth of adjunct faculty positions may not mean more power over administrative decision-making, this situation opens up a huge door for adjunct faculty members to educate students about the academic hiring system and the world they are playing a part in supporting. This is a good reminder of the power we adjuncts have to fuel generational change about issues far broader than education.

## Reflection

"Adjuncts allow departments to provide the course offerings so our students can graduate on time," notes Kevin Guskiewicz, former interim chancellor at the University of North Carolina, "while allowing our tenure-track faculty to balance teaching, scholarship and service" (Douglas-Gabriel). This says it all—adjuncts exist so full-timers can research, write, and mentor and so students can move through college swiftly to make room for new students and new enrollment dollars. The scholarship and service of an adjunct is not valued. The lack of respect (financially or otherwise) we are accorded in practice in higher education shows that we are viewed by those in charge of the system as the necessary evil.

Since I began full-time adjuncting in 2009, I have taught for almost a dozen schools. I left the first after I found out it recruited students from homeless shelters. Yet even at that institution, adjuncts were given more of a voice and recognition than at other, more "reputable" colleges where I have worked. As adjuncts, we walk a fine line between making money, maintaining our personal ethics, supporting students, and ensuring our individual happiness. There is no hard-and-fast primer to determine the right balance, as these are intensely individual choices we all must make when navigating the adjunct world. Don't ignore these decisions, and do not be surprised that the more you adjunct, the more lines become blurred.

Being an adjunct means you'll see academia in a way you probably didn't before, and it will change you and what you want out of your academic career. Embrace that, and don't feel shackled by past decisions or current departments. Keep your CV current and never feel you aren't being transparent with your current employers by looking to see what's out there. There is little to lose in seeing if the grass is, in fact, greener elsewhere, especially when a department will drop you at a moment's notice, as you have no contract it needs to worry about violating.

As Christopher Newfield argues, the "Great Mistake" that academia made was to forget that higher education is a public good and to instead come to value profit over the social impact of the college experience for all involved (492). For now, though, while I expect the profit motive is here to stay, we must remember adjuncts are producers, not just consumers, in the higher education system. We do have power within it to carve out a niche that allows us to pursue an academic career within the sphere of adjuncting. Whether the benefits of working within the system are worth the pressures is entirely an individual choice, but if adjuncts

leverage their individual choices and collective wills, there is still ample hope the profession's drawbacks can lessen and its benefits rise, not just for those who teach, but for everyone in higher education in the future.

## Works Cited

"2021 Poverty Guidelines." *ASPE: Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation*, https://aspe.hhs.gov/topics/poverty-economic-mobility/poverty-guidelines/prior-hhs-poverty-guidelines-federal-register-references/2021-poverty-guidelines.

"Background Facts on Contingent Faculty Positions." *AAUP: American Association of University Professors*, https://www.aaup.org/issues/contingency/background-facts.

Carrera, Catherine. "NJ Adjuncts Get 'Biggest Increase' Ever in Pay, While Full-Time Professors Vote to Strike." *NorthJersey.com*, 26 Nov. 2019, https://www.northjersey.com/story/news/2019/11/26/nj-colleges-adjuncts-get-big-raise-full-time-professors-strike/4300990002/.

Douglas-Gabriel, Danielle. "'It Keeps You Nice and Disposable': The Plight of Adjunct Professors." *The Washington Post*, 15 Feb. 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/it-keeps-you-nice-and-disposable-the-plight-of-adjunct-professors/2019/02/14/6cd5cbe4-024d-11e9-b5df-5d3874f1ac36_story.html.

Duncan, John C., Jr. "The Indentured Servants of Academia: The Adjunct Faculty Dilemma and Their Limited Legal Remedies." *Indiana Law Journal*, vol. 74, no. 2, 1999, pp. 513-86. *Indiana University Bloomington Maurer School of Law Digital Repository*, https://www.repository.law.indiana.edu/ilj/vol74/iss2/3/.

"Faculty Wellness and Careers." *Blog—Announcements*, Course Hero, 18 Nov. 2020, https://www.coursehero.com/blog/faculty-wellness-research/.

"Fidelity Investments and The Chronicle of Higher Education Study: More Than Half of College and University Faculty Considering Leaving Teaching, Citing Burnout Caused by Pandemic." *Fidelity Investments*, 25 Feb. 2021. https://newsroom.fidelity.com/press-releases/news-details/2021/Fidelity-Investments--The-Chronicle-of-Higher-Education-Study-More-Than-Half-of-College-and-University-Faculty-Considering-Leaving-Teaching-Citing-Burnout-Caused-by-Pandemic/default.aspx. Press release.

Finkelstein, Martin J., et al. *The Faculty Factor: Reassessing the American Academy in a Turbulent Era*. Johns Hopkins UP, 2016.

Finley, Laura. "Adjunct Professors and Workers' Rights." *Counterpunch*, 27 July 2015, https://www.counterpunch.org/2015/07/27/adjunct-professors-and-workers-rights/.

Flaherty, Colleen. "Barely Getting By." *Inside Higher Ed*, 20 Apr. 2020, https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/04/20/new-report-says-many-adjuncts-make-less-3500-course-and-25000-year.

---. "Congress Takes Note." *Inside Higher Ed*, 24 Jan. 2014. https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/01/24/house-committee-report-highlights-plight-adjunct-professors.

----. "More Faculty Diversity, Not on Tenure Track." *Inside Higher Ed*, 22 Aug. 2016, https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/08/22/study-finds-gains-faculty-diversity-not-tenure-track.

----. "New Data on Faculty Strikes." *Inside Higher Ed*, 28 Aug. 2019, https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2019/08/28/new-data-faculty-strikes.

Ginsberg, Benjamin. *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why It Matters*. Oxford UP, 2011. *Oxford Scholarship Online*, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199782444.001.0001.

Hearn, James C., and Rachel Burns. "Contingent Faculty Employment and Financial Stress in Public Universities." *The Journal of Higher Education*, vol. 92, no. 3, 2021, pp. 331-62. *Taylor and Francis Online*, https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2020.1851570.

Hesli, Vicki L., and Jae Mook Lee. "Job Satisfaction in Academia: Why Are Some Faculty Members Happier than Others?" *PS: Political Science and Politics,* vol. 46, no. 2, 2013, pp. 339-54. *Cambridge Core*, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096513000048.

Kezar, Adrianna, and Tom DePaola. "Understanding the Need For Unions: Contingent Faculty Working Conditions and the Relationship to Student Learning." *Professors in the Gig Economy: Unionizing Adjunct Faculty in America,* edited by Kim Tolley, John Hopkins UP, 2018, pp. 27-45.

Lashuel, Hilal A. "The Busy Lives of Academics Have Hidden Costs—and Universities Must Take Better Care of Their Faculty Members." *Nature Careers Community*, 5 Mar. 2020, https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-020-00661-w.

McNaughtan, Jon, et al. "Understanding the Growth of Contingent Faculty." *New Directions for Institutional Research*, vol. 2017, no. 176, 2017, pp. 9-26. *Wiley Online Library*, https://doi.org/10.1002/ir.20241.

Newfield, Christopher. "Have We Wrecked Public Universities? The Case of the American Decline Cycle." *The British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 69, no. 2, 2018, pp. 484-93. *Wiley Online Library*, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12339_1.

Nye, Adele. "Building an Online Academic Learning Community among Undergraduate Students." *Distance Education*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2015, pp. 115-28. *Taylor and Francis Online*, https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2015.1019969.

Pettit, Emma. "'Now Comes the Hard Part': 20-Day Strike at Wright State Has Ended." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 11 Feb. 2019, https://www.chronicle.com/article/now-comes-the-hard-part-20-day-strike-at-wright-state-has-ended/.

Proper, Eve. "Contingent Faculty at For-Profit Institutions." *New Directions for Institutional Research*, vol. 2017, no. 176, 2017, pp. 97-110. *Wiley Online Library*, https://doi.org/10.1002/ir.20247.

Roscorla, Tanya. "Collaborative Course Design Helps Colleges Scale Online Learning." *Government Technology*, 11 Jan. 2016, https://www.govtech.com/education/higher-ed/collaborative-course-design-helps-colleges-scale-online-learning.html.

Salvatore, P., et al. "Recent Labor Victories for Adjunct Professors Signal Likely Uptick in Contingent Faculty Organizing." *Proskauer Labor Relations Update*, 16 Feb. 2021, https://www.laborrelationsupdate.com/nlra/recent-labor-victories-for-adjunct-professors-signal-likely-uptick-in-contingent-faculty-organizing/.

Schlaerth, Christian A. I. "Adjuncts Unite! The Struggle to Unionize, Administrative Response, and Building a Bigger Movement." *Labor Studies Journal*, vol. 47, no. 1, 2021, pp. 5-27. *SAGE Journals*, https://doi.org/10.1177/0160449X211028660.

Yang, Junfeng, et al. "Strategies for Smooth and Effective Cross-Cultural Online Collaborative Learning." *Educational Technology and Society,* vol. 17, no. 3, 2014, pp. 208-21, https://drive.google.com/open?id=1JMT6dVTuRoEJsAxdGIILIDBPw6uMKSam.