

Chapter 18. Breaking Up with Higher Ed

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It's mid-January. I'm waiting for spring semester to start so I'll have a paycheck again. I am reading submissions for *Teaching Poor*¹ and just . . . weeping, for my colleagues and my students, for all of us. Right here in the coffee shop, surrounded by tenth grade teachers half my age, who make at least twice what I do. Not that I resent what they make; they deserve it and more. I resent the money-grubbers and corporate pirates who devalue the people like me who trained these teachers. It's the unions that ensure these young teachers are able to make a living, the unions that are starting to fight back against the high-stakes testing mentality that is robbing students of precious class time, and the unions that take a stand against the poverty that pushes so many of us out of a profession we love deeply.

More and more of my higher education colleagues are unionizing, too, but not with the traditional teachers' unions, AFT or NEA, because K-12 has its own struggles right now and its unions can't afford to divide their focus to fight for higher education at the same time. So, many of us have turned to the auto and steel and service workers' unions to fight for us. The reality is that unions are pretty toothless at this point in America's history and whatever concessions we win from what the adjunct/contingent/precariat movement calls badmin—a certain breed of overpaid, non-teaching, business-oriented administrator—will be won with as much blood, sweat, and tears as the Bread and Roses labor movement, fueled by the rank and file in the classrooms. We want to join unions that have experience with those kinds of fights because we know it's going to be dirty and ugly clawing our way back into the middle class. And we're not even talking about tenure here.

Tenure—what one contingent colleague calls the reward for surviving the feudalism of earning a Ph.D.—used to be the proverbial brass ring for post-secondary academics. It's not the sinecure that the public thinks it is, but it at least used to carry with it the promise of protected academic speech in return for the duties of teaching, research, and academic and public service. Physicist Peter Higgs, who proposed the existence of that elementary particle bearing his name, has rather shockingly stated that he probably would not get tenure now because the requirements have increased so much (Aitkenhead). It's becoming increasingly common for administrators, despite what colleagues might say about awarding tenure to scholars who've spent five or six years working in good faith toward that

1. *Teaching Poor* was the working title of the project I handed off to editor Dr. Natalie Dorfled, who brought it to the finish line as the book you're reading now.

goal, to deny tenure for faculty members, making them start all over somewhere else, if they can even get another job offer after having been denied tenure once already. New blood is cheaper.

It's even easier to "fire" contingent instructors: just tell us there are no classes available next semester and hire someone far more pliable and submissive, some eager new graduate or an ABD (all but dissertation) who isn't fed up and desperate enough to cause trouble. Our contingent positions make us wary of trying new pedagogical techniques, make us afraid to push our students too hard or grade too stringently, make us less effective and rigorous than we want to be or should be, rob us of the time to prepare well or grade thoroughly. Learning is hard, frustrating, contentious, combative. Students often don't see why we ask them to do the things we do—to read this book, do this project, write this paper, look up that reference, give that presentation, come prepared to class, make sure those citations are correct—until years later.

We are too hard, assign too much work, expect too much, except when we're not and we don't for fear student "customer" complaints will cost us our job. The truth is, teaching is not about simply drilling facts into our students' heads; it's showing them what they can do with facts and information and how to find them. Little wonder our students are deemed not ready for the business world when we are constrained from challenging them to grow and think for themselves. And yet, ironically, it's the customer service model of education that is producing this result: student as customer, professor as salesclerk, diplomas and degrees as retail goods—all supported by cheap labor while admin is busy protecting the brand from anything seen as controversy, whether that's considering the situation of Palestine or acknowledging forms of discrimination on campus. It's hard to learn how to be a problem solver when people keep giving you the answers for the test to make their own performance data look better.

Little wonder I am weeping in the coffee shop.

By now, members of the public are starting to realize that our higher education system no longer conforms to either their cherished memories or their hopeful ideals. The cost of tuition has, according to one popular measure, risen 1,120 percent since 1978 (Shafrir), the year I graduated from high school and made my way, as the first in my dad's family to do so, to Chatham College, a small private women's college in Pittsburgh, now a university that has quadrupled in enrollment and cost. My years as a student are a stark contrast to what I endured as an adjunct professor. My tuition was equivalent to buying a new car each year, something my family could never afford, but I was given federal grants and loans as well as school grants and graduated with a mere \$4,000 of debt.

But more importantly, that tiny liberal arts college of 600 students was an oasis of learning and community. I felt like a glutton at a banquet each time I registered for classes. My professors were accessible to the point of chumminess; in the English department, it wasn't unheard of to have Friday sherry with our profs or to sit in their offices for hours talking about books and the world. Some of my

most formative learning experiences occurred in those out-of-class encounters with my professors, almost all of whom were tenured or working toward it. I had not even heard the word “adjunct” in connection with professors then.

In graduate school, I became one. Not only did I have a teaching fellowship at Michigan State University, but I was hired along with two of my fellow first-year colleagues to teach introductory composition at a nearby community college. I was just feeling my way into teaching, and I panicked, believing I was totally inadequate to the job. That I didn’t turn out to be completely inept and that I learned over four years to be pretty darn good in the classroom was thanks to some expert tutoring and supervision by my full-time, tenured professors, who had time and means to be great mentors and who were even chummier than my undergrad professors.

We went to the same conferences, hung out in each others’ offices, drank in the same bars, attended the same parties, and met up when travelling abroad over the summer. Class continued over beer and peanuts or wine and cheese. Life-long colleagues were cultivated over coffee. I was in heaven. I was being paid to teach, to learn, to think. The pay wasn’t much, but there was the promise of more, of a steady career in which I could mentor my own students and nurture more intellectual relationships and personal friendships and learn more stuff.

And then there wasn’t.

In the mid to late 1980s, full-time academic jobs dried up. I saw the writing on the wall and escaped without massive student debt by not finishing my Ph.D., which by then would have been in medieval history, a now-hopeless field for full-time employment. I bailed out of New York University, where I’d gone after switching fields, and took up the peripatetic life of a freelance, part-time editor, which, until the 2008 recession hit and work dried up in that field, too, had been paying fairly well. I went back to adjunct teaching because those jobs were still abundant. But the pay had barely changed since I’d last done the work 20 years before as a supplement to freelancing. I watched my savings dwindle, my retirement fund sputter and stall and nosedive, my bills pile up. Twenty-five years later, I was back in the same position I was in right after moving to New York City as a 26-year-old grad student: broke, with no prospects, and up to my eyeballs in credit card debt and back taxes I couldn’t pay.

Like my cousins who worked on the factory line in Pontiac, Michigan, building cars, I found my career outsourced to cheaper workers, in this case, my own colleagues, both younger and older. Tenure lines, which once accounted for the majority of academic faculty positions, have been disappearing at an alarming rate over the last 30 years, until the ratio of tenured to contingent instructors (which includes full-time, untenured lecturers on one- to five-year contracts, graduate assistants, and adjuncts hired on a semester-to-semester basis full or part time) has completely reversed itself (Griffey). Now, approximately 75 percent of faculty everywhere in the country are contingent, and non-tenure track instructors are paid a fraction of what our tenured colleagues earn (*Data Snap-*

shot). We work without healthcare benefits, without retirement plans, without job security, all of which affect our ability to teach well.²

Students are paying ever-increasing tuition for instruction far inferior to what I received as an undergraduate and graduate student, not because the instructors are somehow worse or less intelligent, but because of time constraints imposed upon us by the scramble to make a living. Let me repeat: it's not that we're unqualified or inferior, it's that we're prevented from doing our best work by the lack of institutional support; faculty working conditions are student learning conditions. Contingent faculty members teach the vast majority of the so-called general education or foundational/introductory courses in most disciplines, the ones crucial to making further semesters successful. Yet we have no or little time to mentor or tutor the students who need it most. Too many of us teach as many as seven to nine classes a semester, online and in person, to make ends meet.

During the fall semester of 2014, I taught four different classes at three universities in two states, traveling an average of six hours a day just to get from one to the other. And I had it comparatively easy. Many of my colleagues drive hundreds of miles a week in their commutes, as so-called "freeway flyers" or "road scholars" (ha ha). My gross adjusted income? About \$28,000, in New York City. Imagine trying to raise a child on that, let alone a special needs child as Brianne Bolin has done in Chicago (Quart).

I was never going to get tenure with just a master's degree (though that was once possible at a community college), and I was fine with that. It's one of the conditions that left me free to speak out about the ruination of higher education without fear. I had no career path to jeopardize. But that's one of the factors that keeps so many of us silent. Every now and then, one of us lands a tenure-track job, and it encourages the other doctors and all-but-doctors to engage in the kind of magical thinking that they, too, might get one, if only they don't jeopardize their chances, if only they freely share their painstakingly developed new class with a tenured colleague, if only they take this unpaid professional development course, if only they grovel prettily enough to the head of the department or the dean.

I, too, was fearful and silent for a long time, until I read Caprice Lawless' blog entry, "Teaching Poverty at the Community College." It wasn't a punch in the gut; it was a kick in the pants, a wake-up call like a three-alarm fire. *I am lying to my students. I'm lying about the efficacy of the education they're overpaying for. I am lying about my social class. I am lying about the American Dream. And I am perpetuating my own exploitation for the benefit of people who think my skills and experience are only worth \$15 an hour.*

Not long after, I quit teaching at the College of New Rochelle, which was paying me less than \$250 per credit for a six-credit class while charging \$375 per

2. See also *The Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac, 2020-2021*, in which it is reported that tenured faculty members across all institutions are down to 23.3 percent of the total number of full-time faculty ("Tenure Status").

credit to each of the 28-32 students I taught. I took jobs at New Jersey City University (NJCU) and various colleges of the City University of New York and with the State University of New York system, which all had unions that paid three to four times as much but still left me without benefits or job security, even after I joined those unions. I started to tell my students that I was an adjunct and what that meant to them: that I wasn't available for office hours, that I didn't have as much time to grade their papers as thoughtfully as I should or give them as much feedback as I wanted to and as they deserved because I was teaching at two other schools, that sometimes my preparation wasn't as good as I liked for the same reason. And I broke a big taboo. I told them how much money I made for the class they were taking from me.

"You mean, like, a month, right?" one shocked student responded.

If only.

They couldn't fathom how my salary for teaching them was less than one percent of that class's tuition. Frankly, I still can't either.

From then on, I told every student in my classes exactly how much I made for teaching them. They were shocked, and increasingly, they were angry, too. They wanted to know where their tuition was going. There's still a great unawareness among college students of the consequences of being taught by professors who not only can't give their best but who also can't go to bat for students because they may lose their own jobs. This is their "New Normal," and as Bruce Cockburn sang, "The trouble with normal is it always gets worse." It's just hard to see how much worse it's gotten without the institutional history tenured faculty provide.

But because of many of my fearless colleagues like Lawless and Bolin, students and the public have at least become increasingly aware of the financial shenanigans going on in higher education: grossly overpaid presidents and provosts (Piper and O'Leary); administrative bloat so out of control that administrators now outnumber faculty two-to-one on some college campuses (New England Center); architectural empire-building that nearly bankrupts even wealthy private colleges like New York City's New School (Bellafante) and Cooper Union (Salmon); mismanagement of funds leading to the outright closure of small liberal arts schools like Lebanon College in New Hampshire (Kich); and worst, the deliberate impoverishment of America's intellectuals and educators in the name of so-called trustees' almighty bottom line.

Contingent faculty have told our stories in interviews (Quart; *Why Adjunct Professors*; *College Professors*), documentaries (*Junct*), and comics (Whitney)³; created endless numbers of blogs; publicly petitioned the Departments of Labor and Education, the Pope, and the President; taken to Twitter to shame badmin's bad practices (see the many posts with the hashtag #NotYourAdjunctSidekick

3. Even Garry Trudeau has contributed to the adjunct comics collection. One example is his September 06, 2015, comic, which provides a satirical take on the semester job scramble.

and the account @ass_deans); and set up alternative schools of our own.⁴ The comparisons between higher education and WalMart or McDonald's have been made crystal clear.

Many outspoken contingent faculty colleagues have been threatened with firing (Marvit), lost jobs in retaliation for organizing, or been forced out of their profession by poverty (a situation aptly described by Karen Kelsky in *Quart*). Not a few of them have gone into union organizing themselves (for example, the authors Balay, Bowman, Emmert, Gilmore, and Kovanen in this collection). Bringing their stories to light shows how a particular subset of people is destroying the promises of higher education and the lives of some of our country's best and brightest. Some days, after hearing yet another story, I feel a little like Allen Ginsberg in his opening lines of "Howl": "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked . . ."

Our STEM and social science colleagues remind us that the plural of anecdote is not data, and that's true, but it's difficult to dismiss the repetition of the same facts and experiences over and over again as merely anecdotal. They are part of an under-researched, little-documented national phenomenon affecting every college and university in the country, as well as in Canada, the UK, France, Spain, and Australia, at the very least. That experience includes lack of respect, job precarity, grinding poverty, and the loss of a generation of scholarly research and thought, as well as the accompanying dilution of the quality of education.

If the stories begin to sound the same, it's because they are, whether we teach at community colleges, public or private four-year colleges, art colleges, technical colleges, non-profits or for-profits, or public or private research universities. The one sure commonality every edifice of higher learning in this country (and many abroad) shares is the presence of too many contingents on its faculty and their poor treatment. The differences are merely in degrees of awfulness and abuse.

Our stories reflect how long we've been adjuncting (long enough collectively for the condition to become a verb, anyway), and where we are in abandoning the magical thinking process that keeps us silent. These stories, however they are expressed, of what contingents go through as their temporary contracts stretch into infinity mirror the stages of grief: confidence, hope, disbelief, disillusionment, outrage, rebellion. Sometimes those stories end in death, as in the cases of Thea Hunter and Margaret Mary Vojtko (Harris; Kovalik).⁵

Many of the stories I know best are from my fellow English professors, simply because we are natural storytellers and writing is both a tool and a weapon

4. For example, the Brooklyn Institute for Social Research, a 501(c)3 non-profit that is "actively pioneering a new model for scholarship in the twenty-first century that integrates a commitment to pedagogy, research, and public programming" ("About").

5. Hunter and Vojtko represent the tip of the iceberg, and the COVID-19 pandemic has made and will continue to make it worse. There are many contingents I know who are still teaching and expect to die with their boots on. I certainly did.

for us. My sociology colleagues contribute especially biting analyses of the class war and hypocrisy embedded in the precariat struggle. I'm aware of many more stories of white, straight contingent faculty than of stories from people of color or LGBTQIA+ contingent educators. I wish this were not so because these stories likely carry an extra layer of precarity that needs to be emphasized. Without tenure protection, plain old bigotry has a much freer rein in academe.

The most silent professional population is that of contingent faculty members in the STEM fields, who suffer many of the same working conditions as those working in the humanities but framed in a slightly different way. Instead of perpetual semester-to-semester or one- to three-year contracts, contingent faculty members working in STEM fields often endure the endlessly repeated three- to five-five year postdoc contract originally meant to add a few years of experience to the CV and now used like the temp pool for laboratory workers (Powell). Post-docs, like contingent faculty members, often feel isolated from the university community and excluded from the decisions that affect their livelihoods (*Gender Equity Conversations* 10), but they often make more money than all but full-time contingents—but not much (Collins and Perez).

One reason for the silence of postdocs in STEM fields may be that they have more obvious options than contingent faculty members in the humanities and can more easily move into post- and alternative-academic positions in corporate research. But rest assured that contingent faculty members working in STEM fields do exist, teaching those introductory math, biology, chemistry, and physics courses or laboring away in tenured professors' laboratories.

The purpose of projects like *Teaching Poor* and the book you're holding now is to make the public—parents, students, and government policy makers especially—aware of the working conditions of the majority of the professors teaching in our centers of higher education and how the difficulties they endure affect the quality of our now very expensive education. Not on an abstract level, but on a personal, day to day level of existence.

Others have written well and eloquently—most notably in my opinion, Henry A. Giroux—about the consequences of market capitalism and neoliberalism in education and education policies. But there have been few stories about what contingent faculty member and author Alex Kudera calls “the long day” that every precarious instructor experiences: the jobs at multiple schools; the lost time on the road; the unpaid hours grading papers and preparing for class; the lack of professional courtesy or access to equipment; the student conferences in cars, cafés, and hallways; the necessity of applying for a new job every four months; the lack of paychecks or unemployment over the summer and the pittance we make during the year; standing in line at the social services office with your poorest students or serving them and their families fast food; lack of time to do your own research; staggering student debt too many contingents still carry; stagnation in your own career.

The heat death of higher education.

This story is about Pennsylvania's state negotiators calling contingent faculty members "teaching machines" and suggesting that our pay, such as it is, be reduced and our amount of work raised ("We"). It's about realizing that the unionized groundskeepers at our colleges make more money, get better benefits, and work fewer hours than contingents do. It's about a dean at NJCU saying "adjuncts are so desperate that they'll work for anything" while cutting our pay for professional tutoring from \$27 per hour to \$15 per hour.⁶

That last bit was part of the final straw for me. Not that I had much of a choice. My final summer of teaching, I worked in the writing center at NJCU, which was staffed by well-trained peer tutors and a few contingent professors like me. We weren't far into the summer semester when the dean summarily announced the college was closing the center—next week. Writing tutoring would be moved to a new centralized tutoring hub in the library, staffed by untrained undergrads. I won't detail the abbreviated, fierce but unsuccessful battle we waged. What matters is that suddenly I had no way to support myself over the summer and no chance of collecting unemployment thanks to the rules that exempt teachers from qualifying for it, even though few contingent faculty members have an assurance of re-employment between semesters. For the first time in my life, I was looking at bankruptcy and the welfare line.

Fortunately, for the previous five years, I'd been applying for jobs outside academe, and finally, one of them came through. That eleventh hour rescue was a job in graphic design and document production, skills I cultivated during my 20 years of freelancing. I now work for a great non-profit, with fantastic colleagues, a better salary than I've ever made in my life, excellent health benefits, and a growing retirement fund. We just formed a union, too, for which I'm a shop steward.

Two years into this job, I got out of the awful roommate situation my poverty had forced me into, moved to a great apartment, and started to breathe again. I'm finally clawing my way back into financial security, despite the pandemic. But I've watched my former colleagues suffer through that pandemic in a weekly Zoom meeting I set up for all of us. Some of them have lost jobs and all have had unreasonable expectations dumped on them in the haste to switch to remote teaching. The amount of stress they have been through is unbelievable, the compensation just as bad as it's ever been, the precarity even worse (Valbrun). And it makes me weep all over again, no matter how lucky I was.

The moral of this story? Let go of your magical thinking, colleagues. In all actuality, you have two realistic choices: get out as soon as you can, or stay and organize with a vengeance. Use the power of your numbers to grind the badmin juggernaut to a halt until you get what highly educated professionals deserve. It's already being done elsewhere. That would strike a blow for your students, for education, for all of us who love teaching and the academic life. But whatever you decide to do, save yourself.

6. Personal communication.

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