

# Chapter 20. Contracting and Consulting: Crafting a Career

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Faced with an ever-shrinking academic job market, many contingent faculty members supplement teaching incomes with other contract-based employment (or transition entirely to contracting). In this chapter, we discuss examples of non-teaching contract work that contingent faculty members engage in, raise general issues and research challenges that can arise when contract faculty members work multiple jobs, and suggest ways around these challenges.

Using our combined 25 years of experience as adjuncts and independent contractors, we first explore three areas in which adjuncts may find non-teaching, contract-based work: research support, educational support, and administrative support. Examples of contract-based research support work include GIS and statistical analysis and consulting; manuscript editing, proofreading, or copyediting; grant writing and contracting; and research interview transcribing. Educational support work includes designing curricula, delivering trainings and workshops, offering writing support, providing remote text interpreting, or tutoring. Administrative support work may involve program evaluation or grant evaluation.

Second, we examine the phenomenon of contingent faculty members working multiple jobs. While this practice is not inherently negative, the fact is the vast majority of them do so because of financial pressures. Many contingent faculty members are constantly faced with the choice of whether to take on “just” one more contract job (and the stress it places on their wellbeing) or to limit their work schedule to attempt work-life balance (at a financial cost).

Next, we explore the challenges contract faculty members face when conducting scholarly research. When contracts are short term and ever changing, it becomes difficult to maintain the institutional support necessary for obtaining grants, accessing research resources, and covering publication fees. Even professional development opportunities can be limited because adjuncts often have scheduling conflicts due to working multiple contracts, are not made aware of opportunities, or are not eligible for them. As a result, they can be left feeling like they and their research are stuck in quicksand, sinking deeper and deeper into obscurity.

In the last section, we provide what we call hacks for adjuncts to use to overcome obstacles. Many have written on the solutions that educational institutions could and should enact, most of which would solve these problems. Until that happens, we hope our suggested hacks can help other adjuncts like us survive and, possibly, even thrive.

## Types of Contract Work

Despite years of quality teaching experience, positive evaluations, and scholarly publications, many adjuncts remain on the academic contract teaching circuit indefinitely. How can we manage to make a living? We have adopted the approach of contracting and consulting to supplement the meager income generated by the adjunct life. Specifically, we have been contracting within, and adjacent to, the academy. Ian has been completing short-term research gigs and evaluation projects while Brandi has been working in the realm of student and disability services. In this section, we'll explore three areas in which adjuncts may find contract and consulting work: research support, educational support, and administrative support.

### Research Support

Depending on your prior academic training, freelance research support work is a way to sustain yourself while filling an adjunct or contingent faculty role. Several online services exist to assist both freelance contractors and potential clients, such as *Fiverr*, *Upwork*, and *Guru*, to name a few. Services requested or offered in relation to research projects may include IT support (such as website development, survey creation and administration, or programming), specific creative outputs (including maps, charts, graphs, or graphics), or data analytics (text analysis, qualitative coding, or statistical analyses and interpretations).

Snagging research assistant positions can be challenging because academia doesn't run on tuition dollars. Professor Farnsworth of the television series *Futurama* put it best: academia is "powered by dump trucks of flaming grant money!" ("Reincarnation"). Offering a few times a semester to do any grant-related work has proven to be a pseudo-reliable way of finding short-term salaries. For example, Ian worked for a summer evaluating the concurrent enrollment program at one of the community colleges where he is an adjunct. Even though it was a short-term job, nonetheless it was a \$20 per hour, 20 hour per week supplement to his adjunct salary.

Academics know grants and technical writing better than anyone out there, so we suggest putting that knowledge to work. It can be worth offering to help other researchers with grant writing, manuscript editing, and other research-related tasks. Grant writing work may or may not be paid, but it can be useful if it requires limited time and later leads to a research assistant or analyst position that is paid.

Beyond writing actual grants, there are opportunities to provide other grant subcontracting services. These include transcribing ethnographies or research interviews or completing other research-related tasks that researchers may be looking to contract out. Another way to work with other researchers is to serve on research advisory boards. These roles sometimes can be paid via grant fund-

ing and tend to involve reviewing surveys or other data collection instruments before live deployment or reviewing research results prior to publication or presentation.

## Educational Support

Areas where adjuncts can contribute educational support include tutoring, working in student support services, and designing educational materials. For example, work may be available for private tutors or research mentors/pseudo-advisors. Funding for research design advising and tutoring may or may not be tied in with the grant process but can be particularly useful if students need support beyond what the institution is offering. Ian has been a private tutor and statistical consultant for 15 students to date, with several stating openly that they would not have been able to finish their dissertations without the extra help.

Student support services may also be provided by third-party contractors. Brandi provides remote text interpreting services for students with disabilities, working for multiple agencies as an independent contractor. As an academic with graduate degrees, she has been able to charge premiums for interpreting for graduate level courses and other advanced content. There are also opportunities for multilingual individuals to serve as interpreters or translators of important documents or course materials. Study abroad programs, international campuses, and specific academic programs may be in need of these kinds of services. There may be opportunities to interpret research documents targeted at specific populations as well.

Academics can also act as subject matter experts (SMEs) for publishing and other companies on a contract basis. This work may involve advising on any number of projects, with one of the most common being production of educational materials like textbooks or documentaries. SMEs are also hired to write test banks or create presentation slides to accompany textbooks. Both of us have been approached via professional networking platforms and email to advise or act as SMEs on such projects.

Content creation and freelance writing of educational and other materials is another area in which adjuncts find contract employment. Editors and writers are needed for a wide variety of specialized content about which adjuncts are often highly knowledgeable. Another option that overlaps both educational and research services is editing of professional manuscripts, including academic journal, thesis, and dissertation manuscripts. Some academics earn relatively competitive pay performing these services for students and faculty such as early career researchers or individuals looking to publish in their non-native language.

Another area to consider is providing supplemental training for other professionals. Most of these training programs require a great deal of upfront work, but once they have been conducted a few times, they are much easier to modify on the fly. Some trainings we have been involved with have included

- professional development for K-12 teachers (such as “How to Google-fy Your Classroom” or “Schoolology101”)
- implicit bias training for admissions interviewers at professional schools
- culturally responsive teaching methods training for fellow adjunct instructors

Even better, these trainings can be converted to *YouTube* videos and other specialized resources, then generate passive income via AdSense or marketing via a personal website. You’re unlikely to become the next multimillionaire via these strategies, but you will at least have a passive income stream to supplement your adjunct pay.

## Administrative Support

One type of administrative support that contractors can offer is program evaluation. Program evaluation is one of the most under-appreciated activities within academia. At its core, evaluation is applied research. The outcome is intended to answer the question, “Was this program successful?”—with the answer to this question often determining if a grant is re-funded or extended. Evaluations can be performed for specific programs, as part of a larger grant, or potentially as a retrospective for philanthropic foundations. Getting started in evaluation work requires a relatively low investment, as much of the required training has already occurred in graduate school. Most evaluations will require the evaluator to develop a plan based on specific questions. The short version of this scenario is to replace the word “evaluate” with “research” and suddenly the whole scope of work makes much more sense.

## Learn to Juggle! (Working Multiple Jobs)

Contractors (and, by extension, adjuncts) often work multiple jobs. This isn’t inherently negative, but a problem arises when faculty members are forced to work multiple jobs to make ends meet. This is overwhelmingly the case with adjunct faculty. The most recent nationwide study of the adjunct experience in the US revealed that a whopping 85 percent of contingent faculty members struggle to pay their basic expenses (*An Army* 1).

We have to remember that contract jobs do not look the same across all institutions or businesses. In higher education, they may be labeled as anything from adjunct instructor to visiting professor, contract instructor to limited term lecturer, and more. The same applies in industry, where a job posting may be for a “research scientist” or a “content writer,” with the contractual nature only revealed in the fine print. For some of us, contract teaching means teaching one class a semester while working other jobs. For others, it means teaching six classes a semester at four different institutions. We have both met adjuncts all along this spectrum. One

common thread is that the work is not consistent. Adjuncts lack the job security of knowing that we will be teaching a given number of classes every semester or academic year (and on the rarer occasions that we do, they are still on a contract basis, so renewal each year is contingent on a number of factors).

Having income and work options that are flexible in nature to supplement adjunct income is a requirement for many adjuncts, at least those who try to actively prioritize teaching over other contract work. Contract work has allowed both of us to teach when teaching opportunities are available and still have other work and income when it is not. For example, Brandi has spent over a decade cobbling together work schedules consisting of teaching, transcription, and field course instruction—all on a contract basis.

One thing to consider as an adjunct is how much time you will have for your other jobs. We all know how demanding teaching can be. This means having limited time and energy for other jobs, making it difficult to work in some industries. As a result, creating your own contract-based employment means you can schedule work that fits your needs. More importantly, it means you can charge rates that provide a living wage.

## Research Challenges for Adjuncts

Maintaining an active research program (a phrase commonly seen on the academic job market) becomes increasingly challenging as a long-term adjunct. Research programs require support of various types that is often provided by higher education institutions to full-time, tenure-track faculty members, but not to adjuncts. For example, of the three higher education institutions Brandi has taught for, only one allows a temporary contract instructor with a Ph.D. to serve as a principal investigator (PI) on a research project. This is common practice at many, if not most, colleges and universities; when adjuncts are allowed to serve as PIs, it is only with special approval from the department chair and, often, a dean as well. In many cases, a co-PI who is a tenure-track faculty member at your institution is needed. Functionally speaking, adjuncts have to have supervisors—administrative babysitters, if you will—to maintain active research programs. This means the direction and pace of our research programs are often characterized by zigzags and stalls depending on the level of commitment and support we get from tenure-track faculty members. (There is a way around this, which we will discuss in the next section.)

Applying for research funding without the support of your academic institution is another obstacle faced by adjuncts trying to maintain a research program. Many research grants require institutional affiliations. As we just discussed, as adjuncts, if our affiliations do not allow us to serve as PIs on projects, then we cannot apply for grants as PIs through our institutions; this means that to apply for grants, we must essentially ask tenure-track faculty members to support us and serve as PIs or co-PIs. Not only does this entire system limit adjuncts as

independent researchers and scholars, but it places an unnecessary burden on those tenure-track faculty members who do attempt to provide support for adjunct colleagues.

Now is probably a good time to stop and remind ourselves of the contingent nature of adjunct work. Some contract teaching positions in higher education are one-year positions, but many are only semester assignments. Anybody familiar with the process of research—including grant cycles, field seasons, and revise and resubmit periods—knows that it is rarely possible to complete a scholarly project within the time span of a temporary contract appointment.

Imagine it now: You are adjuncting at two schools, teaching three classes, and working another job to pay the bills. In your spare time, you design a study, prepare and write grant proposals (whose submission dates align with your one-year appointment's schedule), conduct the research and analysis, and submit manuscripts about the work to journals—all within the six- or twelve-month contract appointment. Ludicrous daydream, right?

Contingent affiliations often provide few resources for adjuncts, certainly less than provided for tenure-track faculty members and arguably less than provided for graduate students. Often, contract faculty members are not eligible for professional development programs, support for conferences, departmental research funding, and other institutional support, such as coverage of publication fees. When contract faculty members are eligible for such opportunities, we often do not know of them because often we are not included on institutional or departmental listservs. This is especially discouraging for those adjuncts who stay within academia wanting to make contributions in both teaching and research.

All of these factors together result in what we call “adjunct quicksand.” It is not merely a fear but a reality that the more we adjunct, the more we can lose touch with our research. It becomes more and more difficult to contribute to and maintain relevance in our academic fields when we are distracted by piecing together affiliations that must be renewed or replaced each year or each semester, trying to find a tenure-track faculty member to support our research and serve as co-PI, and working on research entirely outside our full 40-plus hour work week. Further, the longer one adjuncts, the less likely they are to ever be offered a tenure-track position (“The Status”).

## Improving Adjunct Working Conditions: Hacks versus Solutions

In this final section, we provide hacks for adjuncts to navigate the higher educational system. By hacks, we mean tips for adjuncts on finding ways around the systemic barriers to developing their careers. These hacks stand in contrast with solutions, which would result in actual changes to the academic and higher education systems. We focus here on hacks, not solutions, as precious few adjuncts are in a position to actually enact systemic change.

Our first recommendation for those who lack consistent or quality research support is to join an organization that provides independent researchers with resources. For example, the National Coalition of Independent Scholars (<https://www.ncis.org>) provides adjunct academics and other non-tenure-track scholars with research support they would not otherwise receive. Such organizations offer not only a route for adjuncts to serve as PIs on research projects but also the opportunity to apply for research grants that require institutional backing, as these organizations can serve as the required institutional affiliation.

Another option is to negotiate a permanent visiting scholar appointment in an academic department. These unpaid positions can provide library access and other basic research and academic resources. This provides an uninterrupted academic email address as well, especially important when confronted with constantly changing academic affiliations through temporary visiting assistant professor or visiting lecturer positions.

If research is your forte—your calling, your passion—and adjuncting is just a means to that end, cut out the middleman. Many grants and fellowships are open to small business owners. If you're committed to research, it might be worth diving into the business world as a “recovering academic.” For example, the National Science Foundation allows small businesses to apply to many of its research grant programs, with preference given to small, woman-owned, and/or minority-owned businesses.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, independent institutional review boards (IRBs) are available to provide the federally mandated oversight that colleges and universities offer to their affiliated faculty members,<sup>2</sup> and collaborations with “real” academics can still enable your research to continue.

Another tactic for making a living as a contractor is to keep control of the rates you charge for services. When you are starting out, you may be compelled to accept low rates (particularly if work comes through existing grants), but that should not be your long-term rate. Industry professionals earn raises and promotions; contractors increase their rates periodically and as they gain skills.

While hacking the system, be sure to keep your websites and personal and professional social media accounts current with your professional skills. This can be helpful for attracting contract employment and for demonstrating that you are competent (e.g., by displaying an e-portfolio of your work). Do not hesitate to let your colleagues know about your contract-based services and share your web presence with them.

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1. For more information on these opportunities, see the “Programs for Small Businesses” page on the National Science Foundation website at <https://nsf.gov/funding/smallbusiness.jsp>.

2. For a partial list of such independent IRBs, see the “CIRB Members” page on the Consortium of Institutional Review Boards website at <http://www.consortiumofirb.org/cirb-members/>. A Google search using the term “independent IRB” returns a sizeable list as well.

Depending on your background, it may be beneficial to reach out to professional organizations, schools, or businesses to discuss any needs they may have for training or workshops. By providing such services, you can increase your portfolio size, bring in much-needed income, and build connections for future contracting work. Further, this can even out the income, since long-term (six-month-plus) contracts can ensure you still are getting a paycheck over the summers.

## Works Cited

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