

Chapter 4. Adjunctivitis: The Plague of Academia

Marjorie Stewart
GLENVILLE STATE UNIVERSITY

To be contingent means not to know if you'll be teaching next semester.

– Kevin Birmingham

Love means never having to say you're sorry.

– Erich Segal

Long, long ago in a university far, far away—let's call it Private City University (PCU)¹—there was a writing program director who came complete with the appropriate costume—tweed jacket with elbow patches, gray flannel trousers, a slightly rumpled oxford cloth shirt, and a decidedly stained necktie. Long and lean, 60-ish, graying—an English professor from central casting by way of the costume shop.

Unfortunately, in addition to the costume, he came complete with the appropriate instructions. Our writing program director—let us call him Dr. Director—was forced, through the economic circumstances of the university, to rely more and more heavily upon adjuncts to teach composition courses, and he accepted those circumstances. Although he occasionally taught composition, he was, first and foremost, a literature specialist, a medievalist to be precise.

Secure in his own tenure, with about five years until retirement, he saw composition and the need for adjuncts as nothing more than a nuisance. Instead of merely assigning schedules to full-time faculty, he now had to recruit, interview, and hire adjuncts, then struggle to match their availability to the scheduled courses. He had to give them an orientation. He had to observe their teaching and meet with them to discuss it. He had to meet with them yet again to discuss the student evaluations of their teaching. He had to include them in the portfolio review meetings to assess the writing program itself. And he had to pay them a \$50 stipend and feed them lunch out of his budget for those portfolio meetings. In all fairness, at least he did those things. Many schools merely throw adjuncts into the classroom with no support or preparation.

Enter our second character, an adjunct with five years of teaching experience when she came to PCU—me. I was already aware of the precarious lifestyle—low

1. All names have been changed. And changed again. The guilty are protected. The innocent not so much.

pay; no health insurance; and no control over my syllabus, textbook, or teaching methods.

I had applied to the university once before but had not been contacted. The second time, I asked a friend in the registrar's office if she knew anyone. She did. Our hero. She spoke to him; he called me in for an interview.

When the day of my interview came, I took a portfolio of writing assignments, student evaluations, and recommendations. I dialed Dr. Director's extension from the lobby and waited. Soon I saw a man in a tweed jacket with suede elbow patches approaching.²

After a long, awkward wait for an elevator, Dr. Director led me to his office. We sat. He asked me how I knew my friend. He asked why the writing program director at a school where I had taught had changed her name—had she gotten married?

The seasons change. Two years pass. I teach six courses. Dr. Director observes my teaching twice and enthusiastically endorses it. He meets with me to discuss my student evaluations, which exceed the university average in every category and include a number of positive comments. He offers me three Composition I sections for fall 2006, including one honors section.

All is right with the Private City University world.

But not all was right in my world. I had three classes at PCU, two at a local community college, and two with another private college in the suburbs. I had three book bags: a Monday/Wednesday/Friday bag, a Tuesday/Thursday bag, and a Wednesday night bag. If I pointed my car in the wrong direction and didn't realize it within a few miles, I was late for class.

It wasn't just me. Kevin Birmingham describes the profession this way:

It looks like the miles ticking away on her shabby car's odometer. . . . It is coming to terms with the appalling fact that you have spent the better part of the last decade applying for a seat at this table, trying to convince committees in hotel suites that you would be a more effective member of this particular team. It is the painful recognition that it never fully outraged you until the jobs didn't work out.

This had to end.

Then, unfortunately, a local community college advertised a full-time job in composition. Like all of us, in or out of academia, I longed for a living wage and benefits. Even more, I wanted to know where to go every day. I wanted to give up my "If this is Wednesday, it must be Private City University" way of life. I didn't want three book bags lined up in the dining room.

In short, I wanted a real job.

2. Really. I couldn't make this up. A decade earlier he would have been smoking a pipe.

I began to scramble about, gathering information for the application. One requirement: name and contact information of a current supervisor for reference.

No problem, right? My department heads knew the way of the adjunct world—surely they will support me in this extremely long-shot attempt to settle down. All I had to do was to pick one. Choose the department chair who would understand my situation and give me the best recommendation.

I chose Dr. Director. I could certainly rely upon him for a reference, he said. In fact, he said it in an email May 3:

Hello, Marjorie—I'll be glad to recommend you. Please let me know right away if you have to change your teaching assignments here.

Thanks,

Dr. D

In retrospect, the “let me know right away” might have been a warning. Another email arrived about a week later:

Thanks, Marjorie—I am sure you will get the job. Would you still be able to teach the fall Monday afternoon honors ENGL 101? Could you ask to keep this time open? Maybe you could still do the other two classes I mentioned?

Your teaching has been great, and I would hate to lose it.

Thanks,

Dr. D

When I got the email, I had one foot out the door to go out of town. Since I didn't know quite how to answer it, I decided to wait until I got home. After all, I could hardly walk into a new job dictating my schedule. Because Dr. Director seemed encouraging, I didn't worry. After all, he valued my teaching. He said so.

Unfortunately, Dr. Director's idea about how to avoid losing that teaching was puzzling. I received another email on May 16:

Margie, I'm sorry, but at this point I need to ask someone else to teach the fall classes we discussed. I appreciate your letting me know early in the summer about your application to Rural County Community College, but I can't wait until June or July to complete the fall hires. I will be on vacation for most of June, and I want to take care of fall classes now.

I appreciate your excellent work for us, and of course I will be glad to write recommendations, answer questions, etc. Also, if you become available for fall classes, please let me know—

something may well be available.

Thanks,

Dr. D

I could lose my house, I thought—after all, those courses represented almost half of my income for the fall term. I couldn't see the bank understanding Dr. Director's need to fill his classes and therefore waiving my mortgage payments. Ironical that much of the literature about adjunctcy discusses the "homelessness" of adjuncts. I was not only homeless in the university, I now ran the risk of being literally homeless.

At least he said he was sorry.

Shock turned to fury. I ranted a bit.³ I reminded myself of my own rule: Never answer an email that makes you angry until at least 24 hours. This one would take 48.

Then I noticed that he had spelled my name wrong. My name, a part of both my family legacy and my teaching legacy.

My aunt, the aunt for whom I was named, Marjorie Best (who also spelled Marjie with a "j"), died about five years before I started teaching. She left her nieces and nephews a bit of money. Wowie, as we called her, never married. She lived with her mother—my grandmother—and alone after grandma died.

Wowie always rented. She wanted to buy a house, but single women didn't do that—in fact, legally they couldn't do that. When the house where she had lived in a quirky third floor apartment was torn down, Wowie found another great place to live—an apartment with two bedrooms, a formal dining room, and an attic she converted into a studio. When people asked her why she rented such a big apartment, she would say, "Do they think that just because I'm single I should hang on a hook?" When she died, my sister and I, both single women, bought houses using the money she had left us as down payments.

I wish she had known that she bought two houses for single women. I wish she had known I became a teacher. She spent 43 years teaching primary grades, starting in the midst of the Depression with a two-year degree from the Indiana State Normal School, then finishing her bachelor's and her master's degrees—both while teaching full time, and the master's while caring for her el-

3. A 2014 study by psychologists Gretchen M. Reevy and Grace Deason points to venting as a potentially negative coping mechanism used by contingent faculty when they find themselves in stressful circumstances. I could have saved them the trouble of research and just written them a letter.

derly mother. Her first contract said that teachers would be paid their salary “when the school board had the funds,” a not-unusual clause in the 1930s. Sometimes they waited several months for those funds to become available. Teaching salaries improved, though, so that about five years after she retired, new teachers were starting out at more than she had ever made in her career. I grew up with stories of how teachers are treated unjustly. I grew up with stories of a great love of teaching in spite of that injustice.

The shock, anger, and sadness at Dr. Director’s decision provided something I needed, though: the powerful motivation of panic. I obsessed over the application for the Rural County Community College job (they required a three-page cover letter addressing a variety of pedagogical issues) and got it in—pronto.

I remembered a meeting I attended in my second year at PCU. A dean announced an increase in adjunct pay. “Not enough, of course,” he said. “It’s not even a salary, really. It’s an honorarium.”

Well, I’d rather be honored by a living wage and benefits, thanks just the same.⁴

The American Association of University Professors issued a report, *The Annual Report on the Economic Status of the Profession, 2020-21*, that shows the percentage of faculty working on a contingent basis has remained relatively stable at about two thirds since 2006-07. Their report attempts to trace the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic but states:

Any researcher who tries to quantify the economic impact of COVID-19 on contingent faculty members—particularly adjunct faculty members—will quickly discover an ugly secret in higher education: colleges and universities are not required to report detailed employment data on contingent faculty members. (12)

The report goes on to refer to a “dearth of basic information” regarding the demographics of contingent faculty members (12). Given the “data-driven” nature of today’s institutions, it’s hard to make a case to them for improving the conditions of a group about whom the data are unknown.

And those conditions for adjuncts exist for a reason. As Birmingham states:

Amid competing budgetary pressures, classroom instruction is the easiest expense to cut. And part-time employees aren’t just cheap; they also provide curricular flexibility. Unpredictable course enrollments encourage administrators to find faculty who can be hired and fired just as unpredictably.

And such was the case at PCU.

4. Am I whining (a term that will return soon)? Let’s move on and look at the literature—it will be a relief for everyone.

Shortly after this, the plight of adjuncts was brought to light in the story of Margaret Mary Vojtko, a 25-year adjunct at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh. After her death in 2013 at the age of 83, *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* published an op-ed piece by Daniel Kovalik, an attorney for the United Steel Workers, which was attempting to organize adjuncts at Duquesne, and the outrage about working conditions in the academy finally left the hallowed ivy-covered ivory tower and went viral. Kovalik pointed out that adjuncts have no job security, no severance, and no benefits.

Vojtko's story has been fleshed out in more in-depth articles, including one by L.V. Anderson in *Slate*. Even that story, which discusses her hoarding, her frequent refusal to take charity, and her mental health issues, concludes that the university behaved badly, and that the continuing culture of contingent faculty is "a scourge." Anderson declares that underpaid adjuncts are bad for students, bad for taxpayers, and bad for the universities themselves.

As Vojtko's story faded from the public eye, discussions continued to rage within the academy. One particularly unfortunate piece was a letter to the editor of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* headlined, "Is That Whining Adjunct Someone We Want Teaching Our Young?" Written by Catherine Stukel, a full-time professor of business technologies, it entirely ignores the facts of both Vojtko's life and death and the corporate-model systems that have created the adjunct crisis in American education.

Stukel suggests that adjuncts should quit whining and "put on [their] big-girl panties." She reasons that part timers may not be selected for full-time jobs because they are annoying, they are not likeable, they are mediocre, or they don't fully engage their students. I have certainly known both part-time and full-time professors that fall into one or more of those categories. But I have known far more competent, engaging, and likeable professors, again, both in full-time and part-time positions.

Although Stukel does hand out tough but practical advice, it isn't easy. I spent seven long years trying to make the adjunct lifestyle work.

After I didn't get the job at Rural CCC,⁵ I enrolled in a doctoral program in composition. When I was ABD, I got a full-time job with benefits on a one-year contract. I moved from that position to running the writing center at an art school not far from Private City University. I spent four years there, received my doctorate, and then moved to a tenure-track job. Many of my friends and former colleagues have not been as lucky. When I mentioned at a party that I was leaving my job at the art school, half a dozen recent Ph.D.s in literature or composition sent applications in the next day.

As I write that, I know that I am incredibly lucky. I am not smarter, more experienced, or better educated than my contingent faculty friends and colleagues. When I finally decided that enough was enough, I took an enormous risk by

5. Really, is anyone surprised?

investing time and money preparing for a career that might not exist in an environment that was angry, alienated, and alienating.

As early as 1995, Anne Cassebaum asked:

How did our profession become so divided? Why are we in such a weak labor position? The answer goes beyond our own profession as full-time positions get splintered into part-time ones all over the U.S., but the reason for our vulnerability also lies in the attitudes of our fellow educators. (2)

She continues, “How can those who value education exploit educators?” (7).

Unfortunately, neither she nor anyone else has provided an answer to that very good question. Cassebaum does not naively assume that adjunctcy will disappear; she merely argues for fair pay and job security. She points to several “attitude problems” among full-time faculty that work against those goals. Like Dr. Director, most of the faculty members she characterizes are blithely unaware of the plight of adjuncts. They mask their harmful attitudes in benevolent platitudes: “They’re lucky, they don’t have to do all the committee work and extra stuff we do” (2), and “They’re surprisingly professional” (7). I heard that “surprisingly professional” or “surprisingly scholarly” many times.

My friend Chuck is an actor. Once the drama critic in our city’s major daily newspaper described one of his performances as “surprisingly good.” No amount of explanation about how the critic meant that Chuck was cast against type, giving a strong performance in a very different role than he usually plays softened the blow. Chuck has not forgiven the critic to this day.

It might seem as if this essay would have been depressing to write. It wasn’t.⁶ Seeing the weight of stories of adjuncts—nameless, homeless people who bear the responsibility for teaching most of the first-year composition and basic writing courses in colleges today—made me feel less alone. The most frustrating part was understanding that much of the problem exists because full-time faculty members like Dr. Director remain oblivious.

To make changes, full-time faculty members need to learn to speak the language of the adjunct rather than that of the academy on the subject of adjunctcy. I’ve often heard full-time faculty members claiming, “We treat our adjuncts well here.” I used to believe that was true, especially at Private City University.

Until that email, that is. Then I began to believe that there is no way to treat adjuncts well. I believe that the overreliance on part-time instructors has created a system where it is impossible to treat adjuncts well—their very adjunctcy is a symptom of ill treatment. It is part of the discourse of the academy that leads full-time faculty and administration to believe otherwise. It is how Dr. Director can sleep at night.

6. Well, not too depressing.

Wowie never owned her own home, but for her 70th birthday we gave her a dollhouse kit. She became an accomplished miniaturist, first assembling, painting, and wallpapering the house, then crafting tiny furniture for it: a Chippendale highboy, a delicate Queen Anne dining room set, petit-point Persian rugs.

Wowie might have settled for a miniature house, but I am not willing to settle for a miniature career. Once, when I was bemoaning my adjunct lot, my sister pointed out that when I got a “real job,” I could work for better conditions. It is a rocky road. My current college does not have adjunct representation on the faculty senate. When I have advocated for it, I hear the same things I heard as an adjunct: They’re not like us. They just teach their classes and go home. They don’t do research. They won’t want to serve. How would they keep in touch with their constituents? (The same way I do, I suspect—by email). And then, the concession: some, however, are “surprisingly professional.”

It is us-and-them all over again. I still hold the belief that the faculty is all in this together. The divide between tenured and tenure-track faculty, full-time contract faculty, and adjunct faculty must be healed if higher education is to survive this plague.

Perhaps the best cure for adjunctivitis is for the academy to go cold turkey—totally eliminate all adjunct positions, replacing them with full-time tenure-track jobs.⁷ If, after a few years, it turns out to be true that some of us *liked* being second class citizens, *wanted* part-time work, *enjoyed* being nameless and homeless, *refused* representation in shared governance, then exactly that number of adjunct positions could be recreated. Since that is unlikely at best, the next choice would be for all faculty to band together to fight for good working conditions—and the good teaching they might inspire—for all.

Works Cited

- Anderson, L. V. “Death of a Professor.” *Slate*, 17 Nov. 2013, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/education/2013/11/death_of_duquesne_adjunct_margaret_mary_vojtko_what_really_happened_to_her.html.
- The Annual Report on the Economic Status of the Profession, 2020-21*. American Association of University Professors, July 2021. *American Association of University Professors*, 2021, https://www.aaup.org/file/AAUP_ARES_2020-21.pdf.
- Birmingham, Kevin. “‘The Great Shame of Our Profession’: How the Humanities Survive on Exploitation.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 12 Feb. 2017, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-great-shame-of-our-profession/>.
- Cassebaum, Anne. “Adjuncts with an Attitude?: Attitudes Encountered in the Struggle for Fair Pay and Job Security for Adjunct Faculty.” 46th Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Mar. 1995,

7. What drugs am I on, you might rightly ask.

- Washington, DC. Paper. *ERIC*, <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED385853.pdf>.
- Kovalik, Daniel. "Death of an Adjunct." *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 18 Sept. 2013, <https://www.post-gazette.com/opinion/Op-Ed/2013/09/18/Death-of-an-adjunct/stories/201309180224>.
- Reevy, Gretchen M. and Grace Deason. "Predictors of Depression, Stress, and Anxiety among Non-Tenure Track Faculty." *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 5, 2014. *Frontiers*, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00701>.
- Segal, Erich. *Love Story*. 50th anniversary ed., HarperCollins, 2020.
- Stukel, Catherine. "Is That Whining Adjunct Someone We Want Teaching Our Young?" *Letters: Correspondence from Chronicle readers, The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 25 Aug. 2014, <https://www.chronicle.com/blogs/letters/is-that-whining-adjunct-someone-we-want-teaching-our-young/>.