

Chapter 6. A Dark Night and a Brighter Day for Adjuncts

Maria Shine Stewart
CUYAHOGA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Though I may be just one adjunct in academia, I have lived at least nine lives within it. And perhaps my trajectory resembles other adjuncts' lives:

1. Adjuncting for the first institution while completing a master's degree in English.
2. Adjuncting for a second university while working full time (in a very secure writing/editing job) on that campus in a neighboring department.
3. Adjuncting for two other departments in that second university—summer programs for underserved students and continuing education—to purposefully gain versatility.
4. Returning to adjuncting full force at two schools after giving birth to a medically frail child and “temporarily” surrendering full-time employment.
5. Discovering that even working at three schools simultaneously could be balanced as a child grew stronger and finding a way to align processes (not curricula) across institutions. Also began teaching memoir writing and gained awareness of writing across the lifespan, which became a focus.
6. Adapting to becoming a disabled instructor after an auto accident left significant physical repercussions. (The accident occurred after checking the driving distance to a prospective fourth institution.)
7. As health returned, morphing into an adjunct who believed a full-time teaching job was still within reach, vigorously applying and interviewing, applying and interviewing.
8. Continuing to be an adjunct while fulfilling a one-year stint as a full-time, non-tenure-track faculty member, a big break that broke when that NTT position was not renewed.
9. Remaining an adjunct in the autumn of life, collecting scant retirement income that is further slashed by the Windfall Elimination Provision that seems counterintuitive after years of substantially paying into both state retirement and Social Security systems.¹

Along the way, I earned a second master's degree, in counseling, and discovered that adjunct labor occupies a substantial part of that field's staffing as well. I do not begrudge adjuncts who “made it,” finding a way to secure employment. These have included talented faculty much younger than I am whom I cheered on

1. For more information, see “What Is the Windfall Elimination Provision?”

when they were in graduate school, and I was mid-career. Their work, earnings, and visibility have ascended. I have remained behind.

Yes, I have been fulfilled from working with the hundreds, likely thousands, of students who have crossed my path; from working with some extraordinary colleagues; and from the joy of witnessing students' growth and engaging in a genuinely creative profession. However, I have felt the ache of scant opportunity to share what I've learned about teaching and about writing—and about colleges and universities, for that matter. I have presented at some conferences and written for publications about higher education, but that sense of camaraderie of working on a project is short-lived. Also, I have faced ongoing economic consequences of my part-time employment, such as those engendered by having two surgeries for cancer.

And, for all intents and purposes, I wear a durable, all-seasons invisibility cloak at my colleges. For adjuncts, there can be no career closure, no retirement status, no title of Adjunct Emeritus—even if our files are bursting with student papers, our minds percolating ideas, and our wallets and purses and phones holding bills (the kind you pay, not the other kind).

Others like me could not have imagined such an outcome when we fell in love with our profession, our calling. A plumber observed: "You must be a good teacher. You teach at three schools." If only that perception of adjuncts were more widespread instead of the harmful stereotypes that persist within academia.

Though on a cheerful day my life might overflow with optimism, as represented in a piece I wrote called "A Kinder Campus for Adjuncts" (reprinted with modifications in this essay as "A Brighter Day"), realistically, less upbeat moments do gather. "The Plight of the Nonrenewed," another piece I wrote which is also reprinted with modifications here, this time titled "A Dark Night," emerged in a very dark time.

"Some professors soar; adjuncts flap and dive and flap again—until they can't flap anymore" (Harris). I hope if you are an adjunct reading this piece, this moment finds you aloft, and if you are a tenured ally or administrator, I hope you might venture forth to help us all fly together, in formation, with the power of unity, purpose, and strength.

I.A Dark Night

Dear Academic Department:²

I hadn't intended to write one of these letters, ever. I thought that loyalty was part and parcel of being a colleague; however, I wasn't put on the course schedule

2. Thank you to Doug Lederman and Scott Jaschik, editors at *Inside Higher Ed*, for their support of my writing over many years and permission to reprint this section, which has been modified slightly from the original. It was published initially as Anonymous, "The Plight of the Nonrenewed" in *Inside Higher Ed*.

after two decades of teaching here.³

You let me discover this by myself—with no explanation. And the timing could not have been worse. My spouse is unemployed; our child is in college. We may have to leave our home.

I know: There are hard times all over. Why should it—or could it—be different for my family?

When nonrenewals happen, one's imagination runs wild. If there was some perceived deficiency for which I was nonrenewed, it's probably better to know, though my self-esteem is currently flattened. And if it were simply an error, it would seem natural that an error could be quickly fixed. Instead, I am in limbo.

If my nonrenewal was (as someone close to me suggested) due to adjunct activism, that could be devastating—but true. "Oh, now I understand why that topic was important to you," a family member said.

Alternatively, you may not be mulling over any of this. As a distant member of the busy department, I am probably not on your radar. Perhaps the department never really knew me fully as a teacher or scholar. The few times I tried to discuss my own intellectual life or community activities or writing, tenured colleagues appeared uninterested. A friend was even told, "Don't talk about your ideas to colleagues too much."

Like others in academia, some readers may assert that responsibility for sustaining or creating positions lies above or beyond—the dean's office, the provost, the VPs, the president, the board of trustees, even trends around the country. But while I am wondering how I will meet next year's expenses and pursue what I consider my vocation, I am also wondering if readers can help stem the erosion of positions. You might be able to create better working conditions: if not for my generation, then for the next. You do have the power (Keenan).

Perhaps you can show me that my bad-day comparison of the role of adjuncts in the university "family" as comparable to forgotten kids in the homes of the distracted rich is not valid. Perhaps you can show me that fierce battles you fight elsewhere in the university arena and within your scholarly discipline can be fought for less visible colleagues. Perhaps you can go to the mat for your department as a whole and possibly the future of your . . . our . . . academic discipline.

Some people think instructors of a certain age have lost their currency, in every meaning of the word. I may find it hard to buy groceries and may need to take out a loan to buy required health insurance—I lack that currency—but I never lost my intellectual currency. If you think your adjuncts are stagnant or too tired to excel, do something. Evaluate, provide in-service . . . and be prepared to discover that you might be wrong.

An energetic, dedicated colleague with 40 years as an adjunct was extremely depressed one fall. I had never seen her as anything other than capable and

3. The sudden absence from the schedule had happened once before, also (initially) without explanation.

charismatic. Nonrenewed. No perceived deficiency in her skills—rather, new colleagues, new chair. Another colleague has left the country, tired of not knowing how she would pay her bills. I am now down at least one-third of my anticipated \$30,000 income in a good year for teaching 10 to 13 courses annually at various schools. Ultimately, there is no Machiavelli guide to being an adjunct (Carroll), though one might strive to be strategic.

Personally, I rolled with the course assignments and never fussed when things didn't go my way. It has been suggested to me by someone outside of academia that too smooth an employee may be perceived as disengaged. Want two classes? Get one . . . or expect two, then get one, if that. Always be prepared to be “bounced,” no matter what your load. Risk overload at multiple schools rather than not being able to pay bills. Teach morning, noon, night, weekend, online.

Some may be thinking: *Get a real job?* Jobs are not abundant in my region. *Publishing?* Dwindling. *Libraries?* Shrinking. *Bookstores?* Nonexistent. *Human services?* Despite rhetoric about our society's mental health needs, few openings. *Alt-ac jobs* on campus or lectureships at two-year schools? Have tried. *Private high schools?* Few slots, no go.

Overheard: *I can't imagine why an adjunct would keep at it after three years.* My imagined comeback: I tried to find other paths. Ironically, every time I applied for a full-time job that did not come through, full-time and part-time colleagues have said, “But you don't really need the job. You have a spouse.” Is this the 21st century?

A well-meaning friend offered the platitude that a door shutting might mean a window opening. It feels, to me, like the door is shutting and the windows are painted shut.

Exit strategy and career plan are, of course, ultimately one's own responsibility.

While I figure out what I can now do for myself: Can there *please* be forward thinking in colleges or universities on how to cultivate, advance or utilize existing talent without strategies that boot talented instructors out—deliberately or accidentally—in our maturity? Other industries value retention and experience. And when it comes to classroom management, literacy acquisition, writing skills, minority outreach: Believe me, adjuncts can enter a campus discussion, given the chance.

Those on this path should be careful. One may end up vulnerable while critically ill or in chemotherapy⁴ or—as I sense myself becoming on other dark days—dejected. As the case of Mary-Faith Cerasoli retaught me, I may be one mishap from the street (“Homeless Professor”). This century may see things getting worse for adjuncts. In the unsolicited words of a former full-timer who left for greener pastures, “Don't get caught” in the part-time pool. But one could get caught.

4. For a description of one infamous case, see Colleen Flaherty's “#iammargaret-mary.”

Or be set free at the absolutely worst moment.
Sincerely,
Saddened

II: A Brighter Day

It was as a secretary in a busy English department at a large state university 40 years ago that I first learned that full-time and part-time faculty occupied different worlds⁵ Although these worlds intersected in the classroom—and at times in my very small office—I wondered even then if better communication and mutual recognition were possible. I saw students served by both forms of faculty. I handled instructional materials created by everyone, and I sensed the degree of commitment—or frustration—that both groups brought to their jobs. From this initial vantage point, expanded by the varied roles I have had on- and off-campus since then (including full-time, non-teaching work plus many years as an adjunct at multiple institutions), I propose three questions for colleges to consider while reflecting on teaching conditions of adjunct faculty members:

- Are adjunct faculty members at your school being treated like professional people?
- Are they supported in the places on campus where they work?
- Are they given things they need to do their very best, even in difficult economic times?

If your answers are already in the affirmative, you may not need to read on. But I urge you to anyway.

Acknowledge Professional People

People, all of us, possess goals and needs and talents. And you know the line belted out by Barbra Streisand—“People who need people are the luckiest people in the world” (Styne and Merrill). I still remember the shock when I first heard that phrase. Not necessarily, Barbra: If someone needs someone, and no one else is around, that individual is not so lucky.

Mishaps occur to everyone, regardless of job title. But if the copier is broken, and no one is there to help (and an adjunct faculty member drove a long distance to prepare materials), that’s not lucky. If a contingent faculty member has completed a creative project in the community—and no one on the campus acknowledges it—that’s not lucky. If a student needs astute advising and administrative offices are closed (while an adjunct instructor is teaching very late), that’s

5. Thank you to Doug Lederman and Scott Jaschik, editors at *Inside Higher Ed*, for their support of my writing over many years. This section, which has been modified slightly, was published originally as “A Kinder Campus for Adjuncts?” in *Inside Higher Ed*.

not so lucky. And if one dozen capable adjuncts are terminated at the end of the academic year, and no one protests, does their disappearance make a sound?

Memos or emails that go to some people, not all, erode communication. In my experience, when full-time faculty members join a department, only rarely are any adjunct colleagues part of that welcome. Adjuncts themselves may be hired without fanfare, under the wire, with scant preparation time. And policy issues, curricula, debates, textbook decisions . . . Why exclude the full teaching force who might be able to help?

The very adjectives—adjunct, term, contingent—themselves can be dispiriting. “Just an adjunct” is a sad mantra. Every human being needs to feel valued. But let me affirm the upbeat intention of the song “People” (Styne and Merrill). If we are interdependent and rise to the challenge of supporting one another, it is an amazing feeling: “You were half, now you’re whole.” A spirit of camaraderie helps all of us, especially under pressure.

A vivid memory: On one campus where I have regularly taught, an IT staffer quickly talked me through a computer program over the weekend, which was both sanity saving and in the best interest of my students. That is best practice. Often, the savviest campus personnel are status-blind. Can we all strive for that?

Lee Kottner, longtime social media director of New Faculty Majority, has suggested, “Get to know adjunct faculty members, make them visible in the rest of the department. If there’s a web page or poster in the department identifying faculty, include adjuncts” (qtd in Stewart).

Provide Proper Places

Not every campus has individual offices for faculty members, but having a buffer zone around the classroom with even a degree of privacy can greatly improve pre- and post-class communication with students. When you have to rush out of a classroom before the next scheduled teacher approaches—without any space nearby—it can be unsettling. Campuses can incorporate spots of reflection where full- and part-time, tenured, and contingent faculty members can congregate. Sharing ideas, even just smiles and nods, is not a bad thing.

Yes, cyberspace is an important place. But human contact counts. Being separated from full-time faculty can be isolating. If more visible, all faculty members can be part of transformative conversations and collaboration. One campus exiled a large group of part-time faculty to a space the size of a walk-in closet. It was doubtful that this was done on purpose. In any case, full-time faculty converged to express dismay and got action on that issue—fast.

A colleague in another department was a fellow adjunct for nearly two decades; we met at a gathering of a professional association though we had spent all that time one floor apart, never knowing we shared interests. And one student at a community college seemed surprised to learn that department members oc-

cupping different floors of the same building might not talk, except for awkward moments in the elevator.

“Why doesn’t everyone just bring a dish and have a potluck?” she asked. That was so sensible. Let’s do it.

Supply Required Things

I remember the happy surprise of sticky notes, dry-erase markers, and a pen in my mailbox at one institution at the start of the term. The well-stocked supply room that I had access to as a departmental secretary decades ago is long gone, so like most people, I carry my own supplies. In Kottner’s words: “Treat adjunct faculty like you’d treat your tenured colleagues. Support them with offices, supplies, access to copiers” (qtd in Stewart). And then think bigger. She writes, “Help support their research, too. Make funds for conferences and travel available to adjuncts. In fact, giving adjunct faculty first crack at the funds would be a great idea to balance out pay inequity” (qtd in Stewart).

Joe Fruscione, a freelance editor, cofounder of PrecariCorps and former adjunct, offered further tips on professional development and job satisfaction. “Allow adjunct faculty to teach upper-level courses in their areas of expertise,” he suggested. And he added a thought germane for any adjunct who feels his or her shelf life has expired, urging campuses to provide a “meaningful path to promotion and raises—i.e., reward experience. Don’t punish it” (qtd in Stewart). Opening the doors to workshops, teaching awards, and summer seminars to all faculty members can strengthen the entire institution.

According to Douglas Martin, Herbert Freudenberger first used the word “burnout” in psychology in the mid-1970s, notably in his book examining mental health professionals. It is “the extinction of motivation or incentive, especially where one’s devotion to a cause or relationship fails to produce the desired results” (qtd. in Martin). As described by Scott Plous and Paul Sephton, Christina Maslach and her colleague Michael P. Leiter later defined the antithesis of burnout as engagement. I first heard the word “burnout” from an adjunct faculty member when I was a secretary, and I was startled. Among the team I served, she appeared dedicated and well regarded by students. In time, I learned that idealism does not inoculate one from burnout. Incidentally, that colleague went on to a distinguished career in Montessori education.

A good fit between the institution and those who work for it—along with competent supervision and support—promotes well-being. Furthermore, if people, places and things do not work together to promote a healthy workplace, it creates a palpable domino effect. All faculty members potentially suffer if the talents of their peers are not fully engaged. And students respond to what faculty embody, from exhaustion to exhilaration. Positive morale is contagious. And can’t problem solving involving more perspectives reap dividends as-yet unenvisioned?

A cynical reader might reflect that it's good to keep adjunct faculty uncertain about everything—from available courses next semester to whether the copier will be unjammed before classes start. *Let's keep them on their toes, lest they become slackers.* After all, we are in competition for scant resources. I disagree.

For three years, I served on the Modern Language Association's Committee on Contingent Labor in the Profession and learned about conditions at many colleges and universities. A report titled "Professional Employment Practices for Non-Tenure-Track Faculty Members: Recommendations and Evaluative Questions" that was written by previous members of the committee is available in PDF form (Committee on Contingent Labor in the Profession). If various institutions took even a few questions and worked them through to constructive answers, it could transform conditions for adjunct faculty.

Although some people may still assert that adjunct labor is a given, a low priority, or the rage of the future, the discussion need not stop there. It is within the power of colleges and universities to lead with better professional practices.

Dedicated to the memory of David Wilder, Artist, adjunct, and activist, 1956-2017 (See Farkas; MacDonald to learn more about Wilder.)

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