

Chapter 7. Statusism: How Adjunct Exploitation Isolates and Divides College Faculty

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For six years, I thought daily of death, not as an end to be feared but as a consummation devoutly to be wished.¹ Life seemed hopeless and humiliating, and oblivion seemed a sweet release. Every time I heard that someone had died, I thought, “Lucky bastard.” Whenever I heard that someone had committed suicide, I’d think, “Was he an adjunct? If so, I get it.” My wife still describes her dread coming home every day, worrying that she would find me dead. Her love kept me alive, and her health insurance allowed me to get treatment. I eventually crawled out of the dark pit of depression and have learned skills to protect myself from falling in again.

My fall into depression began in 2008 during my “adjunct awakening.” Prior to this, I had not lamented my contingent status. I began teaching English as a teaching assistant when I started grad school at the University of Kentucky in 1990, and I moved on to work as a part-time instructor at what was then called Lexington Community College, now Bluegrass Community and Technical College (BCTC), in 1997. Prior to 2008, confidence in my ability and work ethic convinced me that I was on the road to full-time employment.

Then came the Great Tenure Debate.

In late 2008, the board of regents for the Kentucky Community and Technical College System (KCTCS), the parent of BCTC, tried to remove the possibility of tenure for new full-time faculty. My initial impulse as a college teacher was to support tenure, even though I was not eligible for it. However, reading the arguments about the issue by full-time faculty members shook my sensibilities. Without tenure, they argued, the college’s full-time faculty would all be . . . gasp . . . adjuncts. Adjuncts were described as “rootless,” despite the fact that many full-time faculty at BCTC came there from other places while many adjuncts, me included, were native to the area.

Furthermore, we were depicted as unreliable. One associate professor claimed, “Every academic coordinator has a story of the adjunct who bails out the day before the semester begins (or during the midterm).” While that may be true, I suspect there may be even more stories of adjuncts who’ve gone beyond their job descrip-

1. Portions of this essay previously appeared in *North of Center* and the *Bluegrass Courier* in articles I wrote about adjunct life. Both were published with the support of tenure-track professor Danny Mayer.

tions in service to their departments: serving on committees, aiding with ongoing projects, and jumping in to take over those abandoned classes at the last minute.

Prior to this, I had noticed that when there were full-time openings available, hiring committees in my area either imported someone from another school, or they chose someone who had only been an adjunct at BCTC for a couple of years (as opposed to a couple of decades). I also noted that the pro-tenure arguments stressed that removing tenure would keep the college from “recruiting” new faculty. Finding potential full-time hires seemed easy to me, as adjuncts at BCTC outnumbered tenure-track profs by more than double.

I could see that there was a stigma attached to being an adjunct.

Systems of segregation, disenfranchisement, and marginalization not only are bred by biased mythologies (such as racism, sexism, etc.) but also breed such mythologies. The caste system of employment in higher education has created a mythology I call “statusism.” I suspect it is the result of cognitive dissonance: The minds of good people see the unfairness of the system and try to find a justification for it. No one likes to think he or she has benefitted from an unjust system. If full-time, tenure-track teachers are treated better than their part-time colleagues, they must *be* better.

Psychology has shown how even randomly applied labels can affect how people see each other and themselves. In the infamous Stanford prison experiment, for example, college students were randomly designated as “guards” and “prisoners.” Soon the “guards” became authoritarian while the “prisoners” submissively accepted the abuse. Thankfully, statusism is not that dramatic, but it is just as real. It is subtle, and it silently creeps into how people who should be colleagues see each other: full-time or part-time, essential or non-essential, voiced or voiceless, permanent or temporary, and tenured or disposable.

One effect of statusism is blaming adjuncts for their status. For example, Catherine Stukel, a full-time professor at Morton Community College, dismissed adjunct concerns as “garbage” in a letter to *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Why are adjuncts not full-time? She said:

Perhaps the position is filled, or the tumblers in the universe just didn’t fall into the right place for you. Or maybe you aren’t aware that you are annoying your colleagues with your opinions about everything, at every meeting, and at every event. Perhaps your full-time colleagues wouldn’t select you for full-time work because you are not likable. Perhaps you have a reputation for mediocrity, or you don’t fully engage your students. Did you ever think of another profession? Would you advise your own students to work part time with no benefits when there are plenty of full-time opportunities in this world just waiting for them?

To Stukel, the system is a just meritocracy. You didn’t get an interview for a full-time job at the school where you’ve been teaching for years? Obviously, you are

either unlikeable or a bad teacher. Psychologically, tenure-track professors have a strong motivation to defend the system that elevates them. “Did you ever think of another profession?” Adjuncts willingly take jobs as adjuncts and don’t quit even though their continued adjunct status should tell them they are unsuited for the job, someone like Stukel would say. Thus, adjuncts’ exploitation is their own fault for being so exploitable.

Note that Stukel thought an adjunct might be passed over justly for expressing an opinion that, presumably, tenured colleagues did not like hearing. Statusism provides a handy club with which to pound the few adjuncts who are willing to speak out about the injustice of the system. I had a debate with a tenured professor at BCTC whose views were similar to Stukel’s. The arena was a Facebook group for BCTC faculty, and the topic was a blog entry by Nick DeSantis about how Delgado Community College changed its pay system so that adjuncts would receive their first checks sooner than seven weeks into the semester. BCTC had a similar delay that made adjuncts wait two to four weeks longer than full-time faculty to receive the first check of the semester, and the delay had proven difficult to fix. (One department chair who tried to fix the problem reported to me that the college president replied, “Aren’t the adjuncts used to being screwed over?”).

A tenured professor, whom I’ll call “TP” from here on, responded to the DeSantis blog entry by posting, “It will be done as long as people are lining up for their abuse?” I replied, “I wouldn’t blame the victim for the abuse. With most colleges in America exploiting adjuncts, it’s either play the game by their rules or go home.” TP was not having any of that: “How many years would it take until it was too much? That is how many years they will exploit adjuncts’ labor (which seems forever as they accept whatever is thrown at them). That is not ‘me’ blaming the ‘victims’—just a cold reality drawn from radical labor history.”

The discussion got a bit heated, and I did my part to stoke the flames. I fired back, “The privileged, pampered, and paid off teaching class exists as a buffer between the administration and the masses of adjuncts—that’s a cold reality, too. Like it or not, you’re part of the equation, too.” (I was very pleased with the alliteration.) Like, Stukel, TP asked why I didn’t do something else with my life, but he also chastised me for inaction, writing, “You don’t like it, it is abusive, do something about it.” But I am, I protested. I was speaking out about the injustice, which, as a lone adjunct, was about all I could do. TP knew that I had published articles about the adjunct issue and had raised adjunct issues on the college email list.

Then came the catch-22. Like Stukel, TP didn’t want to hear adjunct opinions: “This is the problem in regards to you, not adjuncts as a whole. You blame others that in no way exploited you for the fact you have worked as an adjunct for 17 years.” He says the exploitation of adjuncts is the fault of adjuncts silently accepting the exploitation, and that we should “do something” about it. However, that “something” should not be to criticize the system, especially if that means pointing out the role the more privileged class plays in the system.

Notice how TP mentioned the number of years I had worked at BCTC? He did that seven times in the conversation. He had done the same thing in a previous discussion when I had been there 14 years. Over and over, he flogged me with the number. (In both cases, I mentioned my years of service simply to establish my ethos, as we say in freshman comp.) For a long time, I was puzzled that long-serving adjuncts were rarely promoted to full-time status when the rare full-time job was available. Full-time profs expect their years of service to be rewarded with tenure and promotions, so why wouldn't adjuncts' years of service merit the same respect? Stukel and TP give us the answer: The longer we "willingly" work as adjuncts, the more pathetically we seem to enable our own exploitation. Each year tenure-track faculty work should bring them rewards; each year adjuncts work should bring us shame.

Although my playfully alliterative description of tenure-track profs as "privileged, pampered, and paid off" was deliberately provocative, my point that the full-time faculty act as a buffer between the administration and the adjuncts is accurate. We are invisible, even though we are the majority of the faculty. In fact, according to the BCTC *2019-2020 Factbook*, part-time instructors were 66.3 percent of the faculty in fall 2018 (Office of Institutional Planning 79). The full-time faculty have regular meetings and elected leaders and representatives at every level of the system. They have offices in suites where they can discuss the employment issues that affect them. They have visibility and a voice. I imagine they often forget adjuncts exist.

In fact, the chair of the faculty council at BCTC once emailed everyone to explain that a new proposal would result in benefits equality for all faculty. He had to be reminded that adjuncts are also faculty members and that we receive no benefits. Adjuncts rarely meet each other, so we have little opportunity to discuss our common interests and act as one. Those few who speak up often face the ire of the full-time faculty who wash their hands of the exploitation of adjuncts.

Despite TP's insistence that my discontent was a personal failing not shared by other adjuncts, every time I made some public stand, I got private emails from other adjuncts thanking me for speaking out. They said that they felt alone until I said publicly what they were feeling privately. Hoping to build some sort of alliance, I always asked if the emailer would be willing to join a group. The response was always along the lines of "Are you kidding?! I need this job" or "Only if my identity can remain a secret." They are not silent because they accept that their exploitation is their own fault, as TP assumes; they are silent because they are afraid of not being rehired.

We have no job security. Regardless of how long we have taught at a college, the college is under no obligation to offer us classes the next semester. And who decides which adjuncts get classes and how many classes they get? The regents? The president? The academic dean? No. Our bosses are full-time faculty members. The adjuncts who are afraid of speaking out are afraid of the full-time faculty.

This is not to say that tenure-track faculty members try to instill fear or that they are bad people. I have found many sympathetic tenured professors at BCTC, including some who do what they can to change the system of exploitation. One full-time professor published my previous essays in newspapers he edited. Another wrote an essay to accompany one of mine because he worried about me sticking my neck out alone. It's the system that is wrong, not the individuals in it. However, we all have a responsibility to try and change that system. Because they have an organization and a voice, full-time faculty members have more power to effect change than the isolated and invisible adjuncts do.

Stukel's letter prompted some full-time faculty members to push their fellows to join the fight. Amy Lynch-Binieć, a then-associate professor at Kutztown University, posted an open letter to other full-time professors. In it, she takes pride in the hard work that earned her a tenure-track position but acknowledges that her "adjunct colleagues have worked just as hard" without the same rewards. Lynch-Binieć concludes:

The only way I am able to reconcile working in a field that systematically abuses the majority of its workers is to dedicate my service and scholarship to addressing the problem of labor in higher ed. Too many lucky tenured, though, believe as [Stukel] does, that they are special snowflakes. Or, they turn their eyes away, saying "I can't change it," or "I need to focus on my students." I call bullshit. We *can* change it, and improving the working conditions of all teachers *is* focusing on your students. The time for silence is over. In fact, there never was a time for silence. Become allies to your adjunct colleagues. Do something. Say something. Retweeting isn't enough.

In other words, change can only happen when everyone with a voice in higher education makes that change a priority.

Lynch-Binieć's point that the adjunct crisis affects students is important. The quality of education suffers if a professor doesn't have an office, a computer, institutional support, or healthcare coverage. Adjunct professors' health (and, therefore, their work) suffers not only from lack of medical care but also from exhaustion. Without even cost-of-living wage increases, adjuncts constantly must teach more classes at more schools to race inflation. Seven classes in the fall and six in the spring was my norm for several years. That's about the maximum a freshman comp teacher can do, but I've heard of adjuncts in other disciplines teaching ten classes or more.

To be fair to my full-time friends and colleagues, the system is unfair to them as well. Tenure-track faculty members must jump through endless hoops to be hired, tenured, and promoted. By contrast, at every adjunct job I've had, I've been offered the job *before* meeting with my boss. At that first meeting, I received my textbooks and was pointed toward my first class. Then I just stayed there year af-

ter year until the college ran out of classes for me. Garry Trudeau's 1996 depiction of adjunct professors as migrant day laborers only slightly exaggerated the truth. In a brief *Doonesbury* storyline, a guy standing on a flatbed truck said he needed two romantic lit profs, then he pointed to two random people holding up their hands (Trudeau). On the other hand, an assistant professor passes through a long vetting process to teach the same classes I teach after barely a critical glance. The system makes no sense for anyone.

As a profession, we need to rethink how professors are hired, retained, and supported. We need to do it as soon as possible, because our profession is being whittled away by regents, trustees, and state governments that see automated online courses combined with call center support as the best model for higher education. Regents and trustees are often corporate executives, and they see classrooms as the factory floor. Just as they turned manufacturing over to robots, with distribution and retail to follow, they will rid campuses of all full-time professors. The overdependence on adjuncts degrades our profession. Adjuncts are disposable, so the professoriate is disposable. Anyone who values higher education knows the value of having a living person with an active, engaged mind and a storehouse of subject knowledge standing at the front of a classroom. However, those who see colleges as factories will be attracted to the efficiency and homogeneity of automated online courses. The current system is unsustainable, perhaps by design. Why would anyone obtain a master's or doctoral degree with the intention of teaching in college when an adjunct position is the likely result?

So, what do we do?

1. **Unify the faculty.** The caste system breeds statusism that poisons the relationship between full-time and part-time faculty. To defend the professoriate, we must strengthen our profession. If the majority of professors are considered non-essential, how essential are the others? There must be one faculty.
2. **Guarantee adjuncts an equal voice.** As part of faculty unification, the role of faculty in governance must include proportional representation of adjunct faculty.
3. **Protect adjuncts from arbitrary dismissal.** An ombuds for adjunct faculty should be appointed to protect the rights of adjuncts, particularly those who voice adjunct concerns.
4. **Pay adjuncts equally for equal work.** Tenure-track professors estimate the percentage of time they spend teaching as opposed to other duties like committee work and advising. Therefore, it is an easy matter to arrive at the per-credit-hour rate full-time professors are paid at various levels of seniority. As the work of teaching is the same, the pay should be the same. Not recognizing that cheapens our profession. As teaching experience should be valued regardless of the status of the teacher, adjuncts' years of service should be reflected in their rate of pay.

5. **Lengthen the appointments of established adjuncts.** It's ludicrous that some professors who have been teaching several years at a school are granted jobs for life while others who have been teaching a comparable number of years at the same school have to beg for classes each semester. Once adjuncts have proven their mettle, they should receive longer appointments. They should also be preferred candidates for full-time jobs.

I am writing this in late 2021, but a glance at my works cited will reveal that most of the material came from 2014, which is also when I crossed swords with TP. At that time, I considered myself an adjunct activist and was determined to engage daily in a national conversation about our issues. On February 25, 2015, I participated in National Adjunct Walkout Day by attending a meeting in Louisville and becoming part of a group that adjuncts there were forming. I assumed there would be a Walkout Day every year, but 2015 saw the first and last. The other adjuncts in the group we formed all left academia. My enthusiasm for constant struggle waned.

I sought contentment and, in many ways, have found it. While I hate my job, I love my work. Teaching is an art form, and I am passionate about it. I get to design my classes, and that keeps me from getting bored. More than anything else, I feel like I am doing something worthwhile. I sometimes shed a tear that "there are songs in me that won't be sung," as an old Roy Clark song says ("Yesterday, When I Was Young"). I'll never chair a committee, serve in faculty leadership, or coordinate a subject area. I think I'd excel at those things. However, I remind myself of the songs I've sung. I've introduced students to film noir and been asked what other black-and-white movies they should see. I've lectured on great works of literature and encouraged students to explore their own creativity. I've challenged students to think critically about important issues. Former students have stopped me on the sidewalk to tell me how much they value what they learned in my class, and fellow adjuncts have thanked me for saying out loud what they suffer in silence.

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