

Introduction. Hello, My Name Is Natalie, and I Am a Hypocrite

Natalie M. Dorfeld

FLORIDA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

As I write this introduction, I imagine sitting around a circle of academics. Small chat is being made. The coffee is stale. We awkwardly take turns introducing ourselves to the fellow educators and, more importantly, the readers of this collection. When it comes to me, I brush off my corduroy pants and say, “Hi, my name is Natalie. I teach composition and literature at Florida Tech. I am the biggest hypocrite in the world. My practice and preaching are not aligned. In fact, they are not even close. You should probably take your cheese platter and leave now.” But for this to make any sense, we must start at the beginning.

I graduated from Slippery Rock University in 1998, double majoring in philosophy and English with a specialization in writing. The running joke amongst my friends was I wanted to make myself as unemployable as possible. For the next few years, I bounced around between odd jobs in my dismal Rust Belt town (book seller at Borders, head lifeguard, alpaca shaver, housecleaner, and chiropractic assistant) before heading back to SRU for graduate studies.

From 2001-2002, I worked in the writing center at SRU. By day, I tutored undergraduate students. At night, I took composition and literature classes. I found this work deliriously intoxicating because, like most students who major in the humanities, (1) I love to read and write, and (2) I was told I write well. To say I was green about the academic landscape would be putting it mildly. Naively, I followed the advice of my professors, who had entered a more merciful job market, to keep on going. Get that brass ring. Obtain the almighty piled higher and deeper terminal degree.

In 2003, I started my part-time teaching journey while simultaneously pursuing a Ph.D. in English with a concentration in composition and TESOL at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. I worked in northwestern Pennsylvania and was a freeway flyer between multiple campuses: private institution, state school, and community college. In my most productive year as an adjunct professor, I made a whopping \$13,500. No medical benefits. No retirement contribution. I only survived because I was living with my future husband at the time, who had a full-time job with benefits.

Like most on this dysfunctional merry-go-round, I became severely depressed. I sent out what felt like a million resumes, and I quit collecting the rejections after 100. And, like every adjunct out there, I can empathize with the struggle:

- I was denied flu shots from the health center because I was part-time, even though I had more student contact (sometimes double) than full-time faculty.

- I was given classes one day before they started, and then I was chastised by the dean because I was disorganized.
- I didn't have a first or last name. I was "that adjunct in the hall."
- I would attend every math meeting on campus because they served free pizza, and I could not afford a meal plan.
- I furnished my apartment by dumpster diving and made bookshelves out of milk crates and leftover plywood from the lumber yard.

Fast forwarding to today, 2021, I am now a tenured associate professor of English at Florida Institute of Technology, which is a private research university located on the Space Coast. Am I a genius? Hardly. I sometimes misspell cat. Am I well published? Not really. There is always room for improvement. I am simply one of the lucky ones, for I was in the right place at the right time. I have no false illusions of grandeur or superiority. So, why this adjunct collection now, and why do I feel like a giant fraud?

Because I tell my first-year students to follow their passions. I love the English major with every fiber of my being. It's deeply embedded in my soul. Hell, I even show *Dead Poets Society* in class, but I discourage students from hoisting me on their shoulders with my bad back and all. However, when a promising writer comes up to me and says, "I want to be an English professor one day," I want to punch that student in the face. Hard. This would be done out of love, naturally, but the administration would probably frown upon it.

But it also brings up larger and uncomfortable questions in higher education, such as how did we get here? How can one obtain a Ph.D. in English yet make more money as a manager at Burger King? What the hell went wrong? When did it go awry? And perhaps most importantly, how can we help the next generation of academics? Options are desperately needed and a lot more than one of them.

Historical Context

I often wondered why my professors did not warn me about the bleak job market in humanities, but things were very different when they started their careers, the so-called golden ticket days of academia. According to Marc Bousquet, author of *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation*, more than half of the faculty in public institutions were unionized in the 1960s (187). Furthermore, Bousquet notes, in the 1960s-1970s, part-time faculty made up only 20 percent of the total population. They were used as more of a stopgap measure, i.e., if a full-time faculty member took a sabbatical and/or an emergency hire was needed for whatever reason. The rest, 80 percent, were either tenured or on the tenure track (201). And then the 1980s rolled in with a vengeance.

In the era of Reaganism and trickle-down economics, buzzwords like "flexibility" and "supply vs. demand" and "alternative perspective" began to swirl around college campuses (Bousquet 198-99). Couple that with anti-union rhetoric from

politicians, and things started to decline rapidly. Higher education became more of a business, one designed to make money and cut any and all humane corners. What was one easy way to accomplish this? Deny all the bells and whistles that come with full-time employment. In 1987, part-time faculty rose to 40 percent of the faculty in higher education (201).

Today, this system of exploitation has almost completely inverted itself in one working generation. According to New Faculty Majority, which cited data available from the Department of Education, as of 2009, 75.5% of college faculty are considered contingent, “meaning they have NO access to tenure.” That is 1.3 million out of 1.8 million faculty members across the United States. Of those, 50% are adjuncts, which is a part-time professor. For all intents and purposes, they are the backbones of every department but the Walmart laborers of the college: low pay, no retirement contribution, and zero medical benefits (“Facts about Adjuncts” 1). Think it cannot get worse? It does.

According to recent statistics from both New Faculty Majority and Coalition on Academic Workforce:

- Over 1/3 have no office space or phone.
- Ninety percent receive no formal campus or departmental training.
- Class assignments are often received just one or two weeks before classes begin.
- With no health coverage, many are forced to sign up for Medicaid (Douglas-Gabriel).
- Some are paid as little as \$1,500 with the median pay being \$2,700 per class (“Facts about Adjuncts” 1).

To put it bluntly, as stated earlier, you can earn a Ph.D. in English and make more as a manager of a fast-food chain.

And this inequity does not discriminate from college to college. It’s a nationwide epidemic of sorts. According to Scott Jaschik, citing an American Institutes of Research study, between 2003 and 2013, the share of faculty members who were off tenure track increased from:

- 45 to 62 percent at public bachelor’s degree-granting institutions.
- 52 to 60 percent at private bachelor’s-granting colleges.
- 44 to 50 percent at public research universities.
- 80 to 83 percent at community colleges.

To those on the ground floor, this is common knowledge. Outside of the ivory tower, however, this dirty little secret is widely unknown. As Douglas-Gabriel similarly notes, many individuals (students, parents, education policymakers, and journalists) think college professors live a life of the mind: raking in six figure salaries, working twelve-hour weeks, and having the summers off. In fact, it wasn’t until the tragic death of Margaret Mary Vojtko that mainstream media decided to sit up and take notice.

Professor Vojtko taught French for 25 years at Duquesne University, grossing just \$10,000 per year; when she was 83 years old, the school decided not to renew her contract, and she subsequently passed away, impoverished and close to homelessness (Sanchez). The national backlash, which sparked anger and outrage, left many asking, “How can schools that make millions of dollars and be so heartless and greedy? Moreover, if this is widespread, why do working professionals put up with it? Why don’t they fight back?”

The good news is some people are doing just that. In *Reclaiming the Ivory Tower: Organizing Adjuncts to Change Higher Education*, Joe Berry highlights successes at the University of Illinois and Roosevelt University in Chicago. By laying out clear plans—make a committee, go public, recruit allies, act like a union, and spread the word via websites, flyers, and emails—the Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor (COCAL) has been moving the needle steadily there and elsewhere (Berry 118-129). According to its website:

They achieved major gains in June 1998, including the reclassification of PT faculty teach two sections as salaried half-time employees with full medical, dental, and retirement benefits, and a floor of \$4000.00/course. These successes inspired other faculty in the Boston area where there are 58 separate institutions of higher education. However, since most of these colleges had no union, part-time faculty from other colleges began to join with those at UMB [University of Massachusetts Boston], making the April 1999 conference a base for the Boston Project, now in its second year of demonstrating the success of regional coalition. (“History of COCAL” 1)

Likewise, as discussed by Colleen Flaherty, in *The Gig Academy: Mapping Labor in the Neoliberal University*, authors Adrianna Kezar, Daniel T. Scott, and Tom DePaola, detail how this shift from employing full-time to part-time workers isn’t limited to just faculty employment. It’s a canary in the coal mine for post-secondary education as a whole.

The text “notes that academic and support staff members, librarians, curators, archivists, and postdoctoral fellows have all suffered steep cuts to their ranks in recent years, as well” As a result, Flaherty notes, many office and administrative staff are either part-time employees or outsourced, which can lead to poverty-like wages, unrealistic overloads, and demoralizing mental health effects.

For those working at state schools with strong unions that have the ability to organize and strike, change is happening. It may seem painfully slow, but it is occurring nonetheless. For others, specifically those in locales without union protection, the battle for equality can feel like two steps forward and one step back. And in a right to work state, such as Florida, where I work? Things become gray and murky. Tread lightly, my friend. If one is too vocal, he/she runs the risk of being dismissed.

Contingency, Exploitation, and Solidarity: Labor and Action in English Composition, edited by Seth Kahn, William B. Licker, and Amy Lynch-Binieck, touches upon this delicate balancing act, with a call for full-time faculty to advocate and stand behind their peers in the trenches.

In one chapter noted in their collection, “Adjuncts Foster Change: Improving Adjunct Working Conditions by Forming an Associate Faculty Coalition (AFC),” Tracy Donhardt and Sarah Layden discuss how the AFC at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) was created to improve working conditions for contingent faculty, secure funding for conferences, obtain office spaces, and win modest raises. Through much back and forth with administrators, small gains were made, including:

We were invited to serve on the committee to plan the campus-wide orientation for part-time faculty for fall 2011, the first such offer ever made. We increased membership in the Coalition to nearly 250 part-time faculty, full-time faculty, staff, and students. We gained additional media coverage . . . Where no raises for part-time faculty had been approved in years, the Coalition lobbied for and won raises for those working in the School of Liberal Arts . . . We held a “Coffee with the Coalition” event to promote our existence and remind students, faculty, and staff of our mission and the need to get involved. We held a third-annual teach-in. We gained professional development funds for all part-time faculty across campus who presented at conferences. (194-195)

Such stories reveal why multiple voices, angles, and solutions are needed at this time in higher education. As others have noted, on the most basic level, adjuncts should be given access to professional development, decision making votes regarding their classes and policies, adequate meeting spaces with students, instructional resources, fair and transparent renewals, and a place at the table during department meetings (Heitsch, Levine, and Madison 96). But we can do better. We must do better for all parties involved.

Purpose and Organization of the Book

With the onset of the recent pandemic, academia is at a crossroads. 1. Enterprising graduate students are in limbo because of departmental cuts and new caps on M.A. and Ph.D. programs. 2. Adjuncts are being forced back into the classrooms, many lacking adequate insurance, while COVID-19 spreads like wildfire. 3. Chairs and deans are running around with their heads cut off due to projected enrollment and budget woes. Some smaller institutions may be forced to close their iron gates forever. People are angry and rightfully so.

What makes this book a different animal? I like to think of this narrative collection as a Target store—because it is classier than Walmart—for academ-

ics. There is something for everyone. Likewise, because ages and living situations vary a great deal, individuals need a Plan B. Its goal is to reach faculty members in three phases of their careers:

- those thinking of entering the profession
- those knee-deep in it and looking for ways to improve conditions
- those who have vacated academic positions for more humane alternative tracks

There is no one-size-fits-all scenario when entering academia. Individuals, especially in the humanities, are expected to make great personal and professional sacrifices. The stories are brutally honest, raw, and vulnerable. Furthermore, it gives a platform to voices that are often silenced, giving readers a sneak peek into what being a college professor really entails.

Part I: The Struggle is Real/Academia's Current Landscape

The first part of this collection isn't meant to dissuade anyone from reaching for their goals, but it is a precautionary warning about the current academic landscape, which involves hiring freezes, campus closings, and the restructuring of departments. Educators know "retrenching" is a pretty word for cutting staff and faculty across the board. As mentioned earlier, 75 percent of faculty members have no access to tenure, leaving them vulnerable and disposable every semester. Statistically speaking, the odds are not in your favor.

Marjorie Stewart, author of "Adjunctivitis: The Plague of Academia" discusses the woes of the "freeway flyer" lifestyle in her piece. To those outside of the academy, this term is widely unknown, but adjuncts know it all too well. The term is used to describe a part-time professor who travels to multiple institutions, often within one day, to piece together some semblance of a full-time job due to the minimal salaries provided by adjunct positions. In addition to the hustle being exhausting, it becomes downright confusing when the days and different schools blend together like a kaleidoscope. She states:

But not all was right in my world. I had three classes at PCU [alias for a private city university], 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.

And others in this section, the ones who have so-called "made it" by securing full-time jobs, note that the part-time struggle often affected their finances and family dynamics, with most not landing stable employment with benefits until they were well into their 40s, 50s, or 60s.

Part II: The Debilitating Effects of Disposability

Piggybacking on Part I, this section reveals the darker undercurrents of academia, the not so pretty version we don't share in the glossy brochures or with prospective parents on group tours. Because the system prides itself on cheap labor, even the greatest and most energetic of faculty members will inevitably feel one (or all) of the following: mental, physical, and emotional exhaustion. And the kicker of all this? Adjunct faculty members are often assigned first-year courses, so they are the people most students will meet first, the ones who are expected to "be happy" and "alert," as one nameless dean encouraged.

For instance, Maria Shine Stewart, one of the contributors featured in Part II, is currently an adjunct faculty member at two colleges. As noted in her chapter, her teaching experience includes 27 continuous years in adjunct capacities at up to four colleges simultaneously, with her introduction to adjunct life coming shortly after completing her first master's degree (in English). She has served on two MLA committees dealing with adjunct labor, one as the result of an appointment and one through member election. She also has a master's degree in counseling and is concerned with community and campus well-being.

She has been a popular columnist at *Inside Higher Ed* from 2011 to the present, and her writing reveals she knows the isolation that goes hand-in-hand with contingent life. As the heart of any department, with over 50% of its faculty being part-time in most liberal arts' programs, her chapter describes the feelings of being underappreciated and often underutilized within the campus population: migrant, marginalized, expendable, and invisible. As she writes of what non-adjuncts sometimes think about adjuncts, "You must be a good teacher. You teach at three different schools." Little do they know the sheer exhaustion that goes on behind the scenes.

If one adds the COVID-19 domino effect (parents teaching from home and Zoom burnout) to the situation, it's not hard to see why the last two years have been overwhelmingly draining, leaving many academics wanting to jump ship all together. Not to mention, a majority of part-time faculty members are not given health insurance by their universities. Many were not given the option to teach remotely while tenured professors had choices. Academia portrays itself as a beacon of fairness and principles. It is not. It is simply a broken system of haves and have-nots.

Part III: Knee-Deep in the Trenches/What Now?

Part III is meant for those who are knee-deep in the academic trenches, including faculty members, administrators, and chairs, from a variety of different institutions and locales. They have completed their graduate or doctoral courses. Perhaps they are happy where they are, or they are quietly looking elsewhere. Already in for the long haul, they are seeking solutions on how to improve their current situation and/or the health of their department.

Anne Balay, author of “Ten Toil . . . Where One Reposes”: Stories of an Adjunct Faculty Organizer” in this section, organizes adjunct faculty members for SEIU Local 1 in St. Louis, Missouri, at the Community College level, the would-be Ivy level, and the urban Catholic level. Missouri is not a state that facilitates public sector bargaining at the best of times, but during the pandemic and accompanying recession, her members will bargain new contracts in the summer of 2021.

Circumstances like these are not rare, but as Balay stated in her chapter, these schools treat contingent faculty “like missionaries who will get their reward in heaven.” She noted that since adjuncts don’t want to wait that long, they develop strategies, organize their fellows, and fight to keep hope alive. More than anything, she said, they yearn to feel like their work—their sacrifice—is meaningful, which they hear in spades from students but from few else at the institutions that employ them.

As their organizer, Balay said her main task is to get out of their way. She relies on her experience as an oral historian and background in queer theory to use the power of the adjunct faculty members’ stories—their embodied, visceral experience—to expose the corrosive norms that bind us all. Only then, she said, can we challenge the regimes that render their work invisible and irrelevant to the real work of the schools where they teach and imagine ways to insert them in the center where they belong.

Other authors in this section offer guidance on a tactile level (student, full-time faculty, and administration advocacy) while still others call for radical systematic reform. This includes the restructuring of academic departments, dividing composition and literature, and either cutting down on the overproduction of doctoral students or providing more stable, well-paying positions that specifically require their qualifications.

Part IV: Bye, Felicia

Part IV is for those who are considering pursuing greener pastures via alternative-academic careers. The authors in this section either advise taking jobs outside of academia and/or have left the field themselves. The one common thread is being an adjunct is not a dead-end job. For working professionals with advanced degrees, there comes a time to say enough is enough. As a result, many of the contributors have moved on to better positions with improved salaries, medical benefits, and retirement contributions.

Ten years ago, Andrea Verschaeve had a full-time, non-tenure track teaching position at a university, and she was receiving a small stipend as the part time director of the school’s writing center. As she notes in her chapter, she was enrolled in a Ph.D. program at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, had completed the required coursework, and was conducting research on her dissertation. She also felt trapped and miserable.

Jason Porath, co-author in this collection with Verschaeve, began his educational journey toward a doctoral degree while working as a special education

teacher at a juvenile detention/treatment center in Michigan. He enrolled in the doctor of educational leadership program at Central Michigan University and, Porath explains, upon completion of the coursework, he entered the dissertation phase eager and enthusiastic to earn the doctoral degree and advance his career. However, a three-year delay in the approval process for data he was interested in using, on top of his mother's diagnosis with multiple sclerosis (MS) and quick decline, derailed his dissertation progress.

Today, both Verschaeve and Porath teach felons in a medium-security North Carolina state prison. They never expected part of their workday to include sally ports and pat downs. They never envisioned their classes being interrupted by correctional officers performing inmate counts, nor did they think their classrooms would be completely devoid of internet access. But they both believe that the educational roadblocks in their lives, which often felt like personal failures, have resulted in fulfilling professional detours. The prison classroom is rewarding in ways that may not be immediately obvious to academic professionals "out in that world." Together, Verschaeve and Porath discuss why they were drawn to a career in education, what their paths looked like over the course of their twenty-plus-years of teaching, and how and why they began—and plan to continue—this gratifying teaching career behind bars.

Conclusion

Being an adjunct professor is hard, more soul crushing than most can imagine. Those who never go through it don't understand what it's like to be a freeway flyer across different states, to teach while sicker than a dog because there is no health insurance for folks like you, and to send hundreds of applications out into the void, only to hear nothing back 75 percent of the time. I admire the honesty and bravery of every narrative in this collection. I also understand what it is like to have a love/hate relationship with the field.

While I encourage students to follow their dreams and throw caution to the wind, I often feel like a hypocrite. If I had the chance to do it all over again, would I? My heart says yes, but my head says no. Hell to the no. It's simply too difficult. The hard truth is that tenured positions are diminishing at record speed. Few faculty members find their way into those positions, despite years of strong academic service and experience. The shame many feel about not being able to support themselves can be paralyzing, trapping non-tenure-track faculty in hopelessness and poverty. It robs them of time and energy to change their situations.

Will this collection provide all the answers? No. That text doesn't exist. Teaching is a deeply personal decision, and I wouldn't want to dissuade anyone from his/her dreams. But every adjunct should know this: it's not you. If you are struggling and feel invisible, know the system tends to eat its young, old, and everyone in-between.

1. So, know the field. Know what you are getting into on day one.
2. If you can unionize and strike, do so. If you hold any position of power and can help contin-

gent faculty (with curriculum overhauls, administrative positions, online options, class schedules, and so on), speak up. Do so often. 3. Be cognizant that there are exit strategies. This is not a sign of defeat. It is simply the highest form of self-care.

At the end of the day, the new faculty majority are the backbone of every department. If they all walked out at the same time, every higher learning institution in the nation would be brought to its knees overnight. It's high time we hear them (*truly* listen to their valid concerns), support their emotional and financial well-being, and treat them with the respect and dignity they wholeheartedly deserve.

Works Cited

- Berry, Joe. *Reclaiming the Ivory Tower: Organizing Adjuncts to Change Higher Education*. Monthly Review Press, 2005.
- Bousquet, Marc. *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation*. New York UP, 2008.
- Donhardt, Tracy, and Sarah Layden. "Adjuncts Foster Change: Improving Adjunct Working Conditions by Forming an Associate Faculty Coalition (AFC)." Kahn, Lalicker, and Lynch-Binieck, pp. 183-97.
- Douglas-Gabriel, Danielle. "This Photo Essay Shows What It Really Means to Be Adjunct Faculty." *The Washington Post*, 24 Oct. 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2016/10/24/this-photo-essay-shows-what-it-really-means-to-be-adjunct-faculty/>.
- "Facts about Adjuncts." *New Faculty Majority*, 2020, <https://www.newfacultymajority.info/facts-about-adjuncts/>.
- Flaherty, Colleen. "The Gig Academy." *Inside Higher Ed*, 10 October 2019, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/10/10/you%E2%80%99ve-heard-gig-economy-what-about-gig-academy>.
- Heitsch, Dorothea, Glenn Levine, and Karen Lentz Madison. "What You Can Do: A Position Paper by the MLA Committee on Contingent Labor in the Profession." *ADE Bulletin*, vol. 153, 2013, pp. 92-97. MAPS: *MLA Academic Program Services*, <https://doi.org/10.1632/ade.153.92>.
- "History of COCAL." *Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor*, <http://www.cocalinternational.org/about-us.html>.
- Jaschik, Scott. "When Colleges Rely on Adjuncts, Where Does the Money Go?" *Insider Higher Ed*, 5 Jan. 2017, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/01/05/study-looks-impact-adjunct-hiring-college-spending-patterns>.
- Kahn, Seth, William B. Lalicker, and Amy Lynch-Binieck, editors. *Contingency, Exploitation, and Solidarity: Labor and Action in English Composition*. The WAC Clearinghouse/UP of Colorado, 2017. *WAC Clearinghouse*, <https://doi.org/10.37514/PER-B.2017.0858>.
- Sanchez, Claudio. "The Sad Death of An Adjunct Professor Sparks a Labor Debate." *NPR*, 22 Sept. 2013, <https://www.npr.org/2013/09/22/224946206/adjunct-professor-dies-destitute-then-sparks-debate>.