

The Adjunctification Of Higher Education: Its Dirty Little Secret Exposed

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ABSTRACT

Tarrant County College District in Fort Worth, Texas - like all schools - es-sentially dismissed me, although they said they were "rearranging my classes." They saw the petition for adjunct justice I had begun as a threat. With a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), all but dissertation (ABD) in Comparative Literature from New York University, they paid me only \$1,800 per semester course, no healthcare. When I looked at my education, then I checked out my income tax return, I realized I did not even make \$15,000 per year. This was a sad state of affairs. But the sadder truth is that I am not unique. There are 1.5 million faculty members in higher education today. Only 25 percent of this number is tenured. Thus, I am a one in 1 million, and of this number, over 50 percent average \$2,700 per semester, no healthcare, and another 25 percent have no tenure and are hired on limited contracts. This means that their job security is just as precarious as ours, and though some instructors may have healthcare, their pay is still not much better, and their insecurity is such that they struggle everyday with the conditions of their palpable precarity. Over 75 percent of professors today are in this predicament. We ask ourselves daily: Should we really stick it out in education?

A while back, I watched the 1960 documentary, "Harvest of Shame" (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yJTVF_dy-a7E), which introduced migrant workers who were dirt poor; poverty was a sad but immediate presence. What is not so obvious - but because this is so, it is much more insidious - is the plight of adjuncts. We are these same poor depicted in the film. We might wear different clothes, hide our destitution a bit more in the urban or suburban dwellings of today's modern universities, but otherwise, there is not much difference between us. How can we survive on the compensation we are paid? Yet many of us need to. Worse, as professionals, how can we show or talk to our students about our abject poverty? How can we tell them truthfully it is worthwhile to learn, when we cannot even make ends meet at the end of the day, with our great education?

A friend and colleague - an academic from Texas whom I call Professor Tenacious Texan (TT) - read this with tears coming to her eyes. She cried because it was her story. She worked hard for that dream, yet she saw that dream destroyed as she slaved away for meager pay, hours and hours spent without gratitude or pay. She could not live on students' praise alone. She could not live without security. So she became angry. But she looked around and instead of saying, "I am leaving this crazy profession," she said, "I am going to fight. This is worth the struggle." And she is fighting now.

FULL TEXT

I was an adjunct but no longer call myself such. I have not taught since last summer. I hope that for education, for us - the precariat, the adjunct, the contingent, the casual, the occasional worker, whatever we want to call ourselves - we have a new year filled with promise, hope, action, change. I am hoping against hope that our tenuous existence will no longer be that invisible barrier that blocks us from the great light against darkness this year, 2014.

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Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), all but dissertation (ABD) in Comparative Literature from New York University, they paid me only \$1,800 per semester course, no healthcare. When I looked at my education, then I checked out my income tax return, I realized I did not even make \$15,000 per year. This was a sad state of affairs. But the sadder truth is that I am not unique. There are 1.5 million faculty members in higher education today. Only 25 percent of this number is tenured. Thus, I am a one in 1 million, and of this number, over 50 percent average \$2,700 per semester, no healthcare, and another 25 percent have no tenure and are hired on limited contracts. This means that their job security is just as precarious as ours, and though some instructors may have healthcare, their pay is still not much better, and their insecurity is such that they struggle everyday with the conditions of their palpable precarity. Over 75 percent of professors today are in this predicament. We ask ourselves daily: Should we really stick it out in education?

The fact too that I went about my days for four years and knew not one other faculty member well speaks volumes; the administration tried to keep us separate, isolated and distinct. Administrators knew they could easily replace me with others who were more complacent or fearful; they did not care with whom, as long as they were not questioned. "Silence and obedience" was the golden rule. And that's what colleges and universities count on. They want us to be afraid. The year before, the college took two of my classes away each semester, hoping that would quiet me into submission. The following calendar year, they gave me my full course load back, thinking I had learned my lesson. But they were wrong. Fear and intimidation cannot quiet truth. Thus, when they realized that had not worked, they threw me out completely, without notice.

What happened to me happens time and time again to those who dare question the status quo. This is why the adjunctification of higher education has been a secret for so long; colleges rid themselves of rabble-rousers like me. While two of my Writing Composition classes had 35 students each, how many students did full-time instructors teach? Adjuncts do not have the wherewithal to give individualized care. Why is it that both adjuncts and their students suffer? Yet how could the full-time instructor who taught the same exact class - at the same exact time - have so many less students and be paid three times as much? Students did not register individually, so they were not choosing me. How many fulltime faculty members who say they feel badly for adjuncts turn a blind eye when they realize such disparities exist? Moreover, I had to sign a draconian contract every semester, checking registration to see if classes would make. So many faceless adjuncts suffer this indignity every semester.

How many of us find ourselves - before the start of a semester - desperately trying to figure out how to make ends meet because our classes have just been cancelled? And how many of us work on our syllabi weeks before only to find we have no classes to teach? Or how many of us are hired two weeks, one week, or even two days before the start of class? I am sure the adjunct who was hired to replace me found himself in just such a quandary. How many administrators do you think care what adjuncts know or even how we teach? We are just bodies to them, filling up their desired quotas - cheap labor to meet their needs.

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More so, for many of us today - unlike years ago - what we teach is our sole source of income. And now, with the ambiguity of the Affordable Care Act, higher education is limiting courses in fear it will have to pay healthcare. Thus, schools are doubly crippling us. The Affordable Care Act, which was intended to help us, and which we originally championed, is now being used against us.

Many universities have been placing adjunct course limits starting in 2014. College systems, such as my own Tarrant County College District, and all over Texas, have been notorious in cutting adjunct hours. This does not even factor in private or public four-year institutions, such as St. Edwards University; they are limiting contingent faculty to six credit hours in 2014 while saying changes have nothing to do with the Affordable Care Act. If I could not survive before on \$14,400, how will I ever survive on less? How can any adjunct survive? Texas is not alone. Many private, public, online, for-profit and not-for-profit institutions all over the United States are playing this cruel game.

So what happens to students as education deteriorates? If we do not teach, who will? If universities are not willing to pay healthcare to adjuncts who average \$2,700 per semester course, do you think they will shell out more money for full faculty hires to replace the adjuncts who are already quitting in droves?

I have heard it mentioned that adjuncts are worth a dime a dozen. Where there is one, there are 1,000. How many of these so-called 1,000 newfound last-minute hires, these superfluous adjuncts, will be ready to teach at a last minute's notice? Worse yet: How many will be able to teach effectively? Think about this logically. The adjunctification of higher education affects all society, whatever role we might play in it: teacher, student, parent, administrator. Teacher working conditions are student learning conditions. Do we really want to be on the losing side? On the side that is morally, ethically wrong?

What is being done to education today is a complete travesty. It is unethical and immoral what my college - and with it, the world of higher education - is doing. Not only do they exploit contingent faculty by denying us living wages and healthcare, but they also deny us any sustainable livelihood. If we do not fight them, we are complicit. Yet how can we fight them when we have no sustenance? The contingent labor force - or what most call us, adjuncts, "add-ons" - is now at least 75 percent and growing. Yet we are not in the news. We are not talked about. We are not anyone's concern. The classrooms keep filling up with students, their test grades keep faltering, and we keep teaching out of car trunks, managing two, three, sometimes four jobs to eke out a living.

When good educators are dismissed from work without reason, when we are paid substandard wages, when we are left dangling until the last minute semester after semester, when we are given no health-care - or have classes cut because they do not want to give us healthcare - when no one, including the media, is willing to do anything to help, what can we do? Higher education as we know it seems doomed. Although now mainstream media seems to be awakening, it is still a far cry to public knowledge. Why is that? It cannot be because people are not interested. People seem not interested because they do not know. If people actually knew, they would be devastated. Students are faltering because their teachers cannot survive. And if people really knew all this, do you think they would sit silently by? How can we teach the students of tomorrow if teachers cannot survive today?

I am not giving up on higher education or on my petition, which now has over 7,200 signatures (please sign and share!: <http://petitions.moveon.org/sign/better-pay-for-adjuncts>). I have begun a page for Adjunct Justice too (<https://www.facebook.com/AdjunctJustice>), with 600 followers, though there is always room for more. I know the power of words, of solidarity, of our 1 million strong. I have given up my individual fight, but I have not given up our fight for justice. We teach today's students, tomorrow's world. How can we give up on that?

This is why I am writing now. Let's raise our voices. Take our cry to our senators and representatives, to our state officials, to our relatives, friends and enemies alike. To our churches and schools, our media. Let's shout out. We need to unite with students, parents, educators - both tenured and contingent workers alike - because we are all one; we cannot let higher education get away with this blatant act against what is good and noble in our profession. Indeed, we have been shunned, turned down, forsaken. We have been abandoned. We are invisible. But we can say, "See who we are. We will not give up. Come fight with us: join us. Be our David against Goliath. Support us against those who want to crumble our Ivory Walls of true learning."

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instead of saying, "I am leaving this crazy profession," she said, "I am going to fight. This is worth the struggle." And she is fighting now.

TT joined the team of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). She is beginning her struggle with Adjunct Justice in New York, but this struggle is a national struggle. What is happening now in New York is also happening in Boston, Los Angeles, D.C. and Seattle. And it can happen anywhere, if we decide to form a real "union" - a state of harmony or agreement. After all, what is a union, but an association formed by people with a common interest or purpose? So if I believe that people have a right for better compensation, benefits, support for research and scholarship, academic freedom, and so on, and Professor TT believes that as well, and she can persuade others to join her, and we can keep doing this in pockets everywhere nationally, won't we have a movement?

And thus, won't we make change happen?

There are public campaigns on the east coast, in the northwest, the west, and now New York. It's the domino effect: it becomes infectious in its beautiful cascade across America. It may begin slowly, tortuously, but it can build up, especially if we nurture it. And we can all be a part of this beautiful initiative. Let's make it so.

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