

How to Fix the Adjunct Crisis

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ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

[...]highlight the achievements of adjuncts teaching the foundational courses.[...]make clear that decent treatment of adjuncts helps your bottom line.[...]leverage the power of collective bargaining.[...]after you've researched your own institution as diligently as you would a scholarly subject, gather the tenured faculty in your department or those in a handful of departments.

FULL TEXT

First, recognize that the problem affects you, too.

"Why won't anyone say the obvious: no one should work as an adjunct." That Facebook post by Claire B. Potter created a little firestorm last fall, which Potter, a professor of history at the New School, fueled with an essay on Inside Higher Ed: "Why Adjuncts Should Quit Complaining and Just Quit." Her argument: "If people refused this labor and did something else with their Ph.D.s — which, according to studies done by professional associations is more than viable — institutions would be forced to adjust their hiring practices."

The backlash was fierce: "Anyone who holds some asinine fantasy about the 'logic' of the market solving the adjunctification of the academy needs to shut up," wrote one commenter. "You do terrible damage to our society."

One adjunct posted on Facebook. "Why don't some of the tenured people quit?"

Marc Bousquet had a different suggestion. An associate professor of film and media studies at Emory University who has written widely about academic labor, Bousquet said on Facebook that, as "active players in superexploitation," tenured faculty should do "the heavy lifting in rebuilding the profession."

With his call to action in mind, we asked four tenured and tenure-track scholars to recommend strategies academics in their position could use to effect change.

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Sara Matthiesen, assistant professor of history and women's, gender, and sexuality studies, George Washington University:

When I was a graduate student, no gain successfully wrested from my former institution was ever accomplished alone —from reversing cuts to health care and funding for Ph.D. students to winning increased support for recruitment and retention of underrepresented students. No doubt if you look into the moments where your university ceded power or resources, you will find a similar pattern. So, while the following suggestions are largely intended for individual junior faculty just starting out on the tenure track, addressing the adjunct crisis in a meaningful way requires collaboration across rank and position. Think of these, therefore, as steps to take on your way to collective action.

Demystify the relationship between your labor and adjunct labor. If you think that paying someone \$1,500 (or less)

and no benefits to teach a semester-long course has no impact on the value of your job because you're on the tenure track, you are simply wrong. The devaluing of our profession hits contingent faculty the hardest, to be sure. But tiered systems make it possible to drive down the compensation and working conditions of all employees, even those at the top. Highlighting this rather than treating adjunct labor as an unfortunate but unrelated development in your profession makes clear that our struggle is shared.

Do your homework. The adjunct crisis is but one part of a broader project intent on chipping away at the principles that have historically defined higher education. Attacks on academic freedom, tenure, and public funding, ever-rising tuition rates, stagnant faculty salaries, bloated but powerful administrations, codes of conduct that prohibit (and discipline) student activism, legal counsel paid to protect the brand, and the winnowing away of faculty governance have collectively produced an environment in which adjuncts outnumbering tenure-stream faculty nearly three to one is the norm.

It can be empowering to understand how exactly we got here. The "neoliberal university" has a history, and understanding that history is necessary if we are to return the university to the public good. I recommend starting with *How the University Works* (NYU Press, 2008) by Marc Bousquet. It offers sharp analysis and a good dose of rage. The next time somebody diagnoses the job market as suffering from "too many Ph.D.s," I promise you will be prepared to (politely) correct them. If a book is too much at the moment, start with Joan Scott's recent incisive critique of how the right has wielded "free speech" as a weapon against academic freedom and in favor of the corporate university.

Power map —your department(s) and your institution. We have all heard it: If you want to get tenure, keep your head down. Only you can decide how much this well-intentioned and depoliticizing warning accurately describes your situation. But before you vow to fight the adjunct crisis as soon as you have tenure and call it a day, stop and take stock. Are there signs that faculty in your department are generally sympathetic to and might even share these concerns about the adjunct crisis? Is your department already committed to avoiding adjunct labor, or does it otherwise have a history of resisting university policies that hamstring faculty? Could you contribute in ways that don't brand you as a rabble-rouser? If you've answered yes to any of these questions, there is more possibility for action than you were previously told.

Once you have assessed your immediate surroundings, do the same for your institution. What is the makeup of contingent faculty versus tenure-stream? When did a shift toward contingent faculty begin? How many tiers of faculty employment are there? Is there open hostility toward tenure on the part of your administration or board of trustees? Who really holds the power within the administration? (Hint: It's usually the people behind the scenes and the trustees, not the spokesperson at the top.) Typically, the quickest way to find answers to these questions is to identify individuals who have been involved for a while, buy them a coffee, and ask them to give you the lay of the land.

Find the fight. Most likely, there is a group already organizing on your campus. Maybe adjuncts at your institution have a union or are working toward one, and there is a role for you to play in that effort. Or maybe there is a group working to increase tenure lines. If you're at a public university, maybe you have an active faculty union. Perhaps there is a coalition already in place comprising employees from various sectors of your university. However formal or informal, find out when people meet and commit yourself to attending once before the end of the academic year. Get on their email list. Figure out what role you can play. If you are having trouble finding something at your campus, consider plugging into one of the AAUP's projects. Their One Faculty, One Resistance campaign is currently confronting targeted faculty harassment. Whatever the specifics, get involved. The future of your profession —and the university —depends on it, and you can't save them alone.

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David Perlmutter, dean of the College of Media and Communication, Texas Tech University:

The adjunct crisis is not the same crisis for everyone everywhere. The predicament for, say, Ph.D.s in American studies in the Northeast is that they cannot find full-time employment on the tenure track and must ply their trade as "roads" scholars, cobbling together one-shot teaching gigs at a low pay scale.

In contrast, for my college of media and communications, we need more full-time faculty to meet our growing classroom needs and research ambitions. Along the way, however, we have learned some best practices that deans can apply to helping adjuncts of all kinds nationally.

First, **reward excellence by paying for it.** When an adjunct has been consistently getting very high marks from the students and through other metrics like peer evaluations, her pay scale should reflect the quality of her work. My job is to find the money. It will always be a struggle and a juggling act, but we must make it a priority.

Second, **persuade research faculty to invest in adjuncts.** In my field and in my college, the tenure-line faculty who teach large lecture intro, middle-level, and upper-level courses understand that their sanity and satisfaction in the classroom depend on how well the teaching faculty prepared students in applied-skills classes. Teaching faculty can also have professional experience that contributes to research. For example, a major area of research in our college is health communication. We collaborate with researchers in health and STEM fields; teaching faculty with professional experience in health industries are often part of the team. It's the optimum creative culture, and deans can help nurture it.

Third, **highlight the achievements of adjuncts teaching the foundational courses.** In my college, for example, we pride ourselves on being tough writing teachers: We force the students to write, rewrite, edit, rewrite again, and critique, and the process is time-consuming and difficult. We loudly praise the efforts of our writing teachers. We do not believe that teaching a doctoral seminar has greater prestige.

Fourth, **find a way to reward adjuncts** for their excellence outside of base pay. Adjuncts should be able to win teaching prizes. They should have access to teaching development funds. They should be invited to faculty functions.

Fifth —and I realize this is most controversial for my fellow deans —**try to convert as many variable and contingent positions as possible** to full-time faculty. Over the last five years, this is exactly what my college has done. Tenure-line faculty and administrators determined that we needed as many stable, focused, expert colleagues as we could get. As of 2017, my university's faculty is about 88 percent full-time. That is remarkably better than the sad national figure of 52 percent, yet our university is still solvent. It can be done. My college has added almost two dozen new full-time teaching faculty positions. A majority came from the ranks of part-timers; many are paid at the same level as tenure-line faculty.

Finally, **make clear that decent treatment of adjuncts helps your bottom line.** Our communications college has experienced a double-digit annual increase in enrollment and credit hours for almost five years. I attribute this boom to many factors, but one certainly is that we aggressively market our faculty's focus on student success. Yes, other universities will claim the same thing, but to use my favorite West Texas expression, they are "all hat and no cattle" unless most of their faculty are full time. We have found that informed parents and potential students will pursue value, not just price.

If alleviating the adjunct crisis is just about urging people to act ethically and humanely, nothing will happen. Human decency must act as a driving force, but we (adjuncts, full-time faculty, administrators, donors, parents, students, and boards of trustees) must work together to emphasize a key point: The quality of our education is our brand. Treating talented professionals badly, underpaying them, disparaging their contributions, marginalizing their intellects, is industrially foolish and budgetarily short-sighted.

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Terry McGlynn, professor of biology, California State University-Dominguez Hills:

Full professors benefit from the exploitation of non-tenure-track instructors. Every semester, some of the units that I would otherwise teach are reassigned to those instructors, who are compensated at a rate lower than I am. The university expects different things from tenured faculty and non-tenure-track faculty, which makes sense because we have different jobs. Regardless, as instructors in the classroom, non-tenure-track faculty are doing the same job, for less pay.

My fellow tenured faculty must **acknowledge the consequences of unequal pay for equal work**: Adjuncts' working conditions are student learning conditions. We need to listen to the concerns of our peers, and give them the resources to do their job effectively. As part of that, we must welcome non-tenure-track faculty into full participation as members of the academic community, including voting roles as a part of faculty governance.

Non-tenure-track positions are not going away. Instead of advocating for 100-percent tenure density, our students and faculty are better served by having secure positions for instructional faculty, with pay, benefits, and job security appropriate for university professionals. At my university, we employ "lecturers," who have slightly higher teaching loads than tenure-track faculty but are not expected to conduct research. These faculty have a high level of job security, better compensation than a collection of short-term adjunct positions, and are valued members of the university community. By creating higher-quality employment for faculty who are filling a consistent need in the curriculum not met by tenure-line professors, we will be able to gain more experienced teachers who have more resources to teach to their full potential.

Finally, **leverage the power of collective bargaining.** I am fortunate to work for the California State University system, where all faculty are represented by the California Faculty Association. For non-tenure-track faculty, our union has secured more pay, guaranteed raises, full benefits for those who teach more than six units per semester, security of employment for experienced instructors, and a range of protections from administrative malfeasance. Tenured allies can use their voices and their influence to support the unionization of adjunct faculty, and advocate for strong representation of adjunct faculty in the faculty union.

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Jennifer Ruth, professor of film studies, Portland State University:

First, **don't disavow responsibility** by hiding behind administrators or non-tenure-track faculty. Debates about academic labor almost always get ugly, because the situation is complex and the stakes are high. It's not surprising, then, that many of us on the tenure track rationalize our uninvolvement by telling ourselves that administrators hold all the power and we are subject to administrative retaliation, and/or that non-tenure-track faculty have the most to gain or lose so we should stay out of it, or restrict ourselves to following their lead, and that to do otherwise is a kind of abuse of power and appropriation of their voices. Thus, we are sometimes helpless or vulnerable and sometimes privileged or predatory –but when are we responsible?

Unless your dean or provost does all the hiring for all types of faculty –from posting the advertisement to conducting the search and making the hire –you have more power than you think. As for leaving it to the non-tenure-track instructors, if you’ve made it through promotion and tenure and served on hiring committees or Faculty Senate or done any number of the things that one does on the way to and then after getting tenure, you know more about how the university works than do most non-tenure-track faculty, so you are better positioned to work toward long-term solutions. If you want to live your life in a department that you helped shape and in a university in which faculty share governance because they are not divided and conquered, then you have your own dog in this fight.

Second, after you’ve researched your own institution as diligently as you would a scholarly subject, **gather the tenured faculty** in your department or those in a handful of departments. **Figure out what a sizable number of you can agree to.** If you all readily agree on what to do and how to do it (save tenure, say, by universalizing the research-teaching-service model for all faculty and afford this by persuading administrators to forego fancy recreation centers and money-sucking centers of excellence), don’t waste your time scheduling a second meeting.

If you disagree and have to practice working through those disagreements, your group actually has legs. There are many questions to answer, and **the answers are by no means self-evident.** Do you want to restore the faculty’s academic freedom by expanding tenure? What might that mean for salaries, hiring practices, workloads, etc.? (Michael Bérubé and I propose what we think is a workable model –a comparably paid teaching-intensive tenure track.) Or do you want to focus on increasing non-tenure-track salaries and relative job security? (You can find case studies of successes here.)

Whatever your goals, **what are you all willing to do** to tighten the screws on administration, and what are you willing to sacrifice yourselves? Acting in good faith and taking people on good faith as these discussions progress –and as they involve more participants and more groups on campus –will be hard and get harder, leading to my third and last piece of advice:

Accept the fact that a problem of this magnitude is unlikely to be corrected without one or more constituencies feeling wronged –and, usually, rightly so. Does creating more good positions (access to job security, comparable salaries, involvement in governance) mean that someone hired casually (in a search conducted by one person, usually the chair) is entitled to the position, or do you open the reconfigured job up so all qualified candidates have a shot and more members of the department have a hand in the hire? Some person or group will be aggrieved either way.

It’s easy to grow self-righteous in such fraught and unhappy circumstances and demonize people whose answers to difficult questions differ from yours. Colleague X wants terminal degrees and open searches and this means Colleague Y will be out of a job! Evil! Colleague X wants Colleague Y in the position so that he can have a power bloc! Evil! People will be wronged –the people whose positions disappear, the graduate students who never hear about a job, the students who can’t take a particular class or have a particular faculty member, the tenure-track and tenured faculty members whose workloads are directly or indirectly affected by reform. Remind yourselves of the goal –what’s best for the long-term health of the faculty and the institution –and that nobody knows for sure how to get there.

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