

# The Pernicious Silencing of the Adjunct Faculty

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## FULL TEXT

The tenuousness of their job security does no good for either teaching or learning. That's bad for every American. The issues of justice surrounding adjunct employment in higher education affect not only adjuncts themselves but also other contingent faculty members who are on short-term contracts with low pay and minimal long-term prospects. Any college or university that hires large numbers of faculty members to work under those conditions also changes its relationship to justice. But what is rarely discussed is how the widespread use of adjuncts also affects justice in the larger society.

Over two-thirds of 2016 high-school graduates in the United States at least began college. As they enroll in introductory and general-education courses in their first semesters, they are most likely to be taught by contingent faculty members, whose assignments are concentrated in those lower-level courses. And, as the saying goes, your teachers' working conditions are your learning conditions.

Working on multiple campuses, juggling curricula, and often having to find additional ways to pay the bills —all are reflections of the low pay and high workload that adjuncts bear. Too often, the results are stress and exhaustion. Teacher-student relationships cannot help faltering under that burden.

Less obvious are the classroom impacts of the precariousness of the adjunct work contract. Those contracts are offered (or not) semester to semester, are typically subject to cancellation up to and including the first day of classes, and are most often dependent on the yea or nay of one department chair.

What does the tenuousness of adjunct work mean for teaching and learning, and how does that affect the pursuit of justice? If your job hangs in the balance, an overriding concern is to keep the supervisor happy, keep your student evaluations uniformly positive, and keep your head down. For many adjuncts, the ideal is to come to no one's attention.

Because your syllabus goes to the department chair at the start of each semester, controversial authors and readings get weeded out. You need to avoid negative comments from students, so you avoid assignments that might challenge anyone's ideas, and you steer classroom conversations away from any topic that might provoke a heated discussion. You don't want to come to the attention of administrators, so you don't participate in speaking events or teach-ins that might draw the ire of powers-that-be.

Yes, there are department chairs and administrators who advocate for adjuncts and for an adjunct's right and responsibility to teach freely. There are adjuncts who can afford to risk teaching freely —buffered, as I am, for instance, by an employed spouse with health insurance. There are adjuncts who do the right thing without a buffer. But no matter how heroic some of them may be, they cannot be a reliable bulwark against the effects of a system that builds job insecurity into the structure of its faculty.

Many academics are concerned that this lack of academic freedom undermines cherished ideas about the role of faculty members in higher education. My concern, though, is that this lack of the freedom to speak, sometimes uncomfortably, on charged issues in a majority of college classrooms undermines a much larger awareness and understanding of social justice.

The majority of young Americans may spend time in college classrooms, but if what they learn and discuss tiptoes around topics like exploitation, violence, and racism, what are they learning? That these are not important issues to think about? That these are not issues that should concern them? That these are issues to be ignored, or even swept under the rug, lest the boat be rocked? As the American Association of University Professors notes, the conditions of adjunct employment put students at risk of being "deprived of the debate essential to citizenship." To this risk I would add the risk that a primary unintended lesson our students might learn from us is how to neglect justice.

More important, adjuncts' timidity, or even fear, affects not just students but also the public at large. When contingent faculty members —who account for 70 percent of college instructors —put the renewal of their teaching contracts at risk if they dare to advise a group of student activists, or to speak about a controversial issue with a journalist, the role of academics as public intellectuals suffers.

A public intellectual uses her work to pursue the public good, while addressing the public directly —through writing, lecturing, or being interviewed. Can an adjunct afford to put the public good ahead of her own job safety in her research or teaching decisions? Not long ago, the precarious nature of public speech came home to me in a personal way. A flurry of media attention around an invitation to Mumia Abu-Jamal, who is serving a life sentence in the murder of a police officer in Philadelphia, as a commencement speaker at Goddard College, where I am a part-time faculty adviser, prompted me to begin mentally composing an op-ed, speaking as a faculty member, with plans to submit the piece to a Philadelphia newspaper. Then I realized that, as an adjunct, I could not risk having my name in print over such a piece. I abandoned the project.

This year the news media carried stories about professors' signing on to public protests of a national travel ban, faculty members writing letters decrying the bulldozing of sacred Lakota sites to build the Dakota Access Pipeline, professors petitioning their colleges to divest from fossil-fuel companies or to become sanctuary campuses. But every year, fewer and fewer faculty members can risk supporting students who take informed and ethical action in the world. The dwindling of the ranks of academically secure faculty members affects not just students but every American.

I don't think college teachers are the only people who have valuable things to say about the world today, but I do think that public discourse is enriched when people who have spent their lives immersed in a field draw on their expertise to educate, inform, analyze, and speak, whether to their students or to the nation. Where will those voices come from, as the proportion of faculty members serving on conditional contracts continues to rise?

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Credit: By Eva Swidler

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