

Welcome to Adjunctville: Where Do We Go from Here?

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Introduction

To many outside of academia, professors live a life of the mind. This includes a six figure salary, 12 hour work week, if that, multiple breaks throughout the year, summers off, paid sabbaticals, and those incredibly fetching sweaters with suede elbow patches. And when people hear the word “tenure,” most assume a job is guaranteed for life. For those inside academia, we know this is the glossy Hollywood version of the esteemed ivory tower.

The cold hard fact remains that 75.5% of those teaching at the collegiate level are contingent, meaning off the tenure track with renewable contracts. Of that percentage, 50% are part-time, which entails no retirement contribution or medical coverage (“Facts about adjuncts”).

Think it cannot get worse? It does. According to recent data:

- 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-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”).

In a nutshell, you can get a Ph.D. in the humanities and make more as a manager at Burger King.

The question then becomes – Why? Why do so many of us go down this path knowing the outcome could be detrimental to one’s physical and financial well-being? And for those already in too deep, what are the options? This article will attempt to provide four recommendations: 1. tweak graduate programs, 2. improve working conditions, 3. restructure English Departments, and 4. just don’t go. Although the predicament is much more complicated than this, and will never be an overnight fix, improvements can be made in order to assist those at every stage of the contingent merry-go-round.

Tweak Graduate Programs

First and foremost is knowing the academic landscape. The job market in the humanities is dismal at best. According to the recent statics, only about 40% English Ph.D.s will land tenure-track positions (Toth 2). More aptly put, “If you’re a grad student, it’s best to read the latest report from the National Science Foundation with a large glass of single-malt whiskey in hand. Scratch that: The top-shelf whiskey is probably out of your budget. Well, Trader Joe’s ‘Two Buck Chuck’ is good, too” (McKenna 1)!

Why, then, do M.A. and Ph.D. programs gear all their classes toward classroom pedagogies and teaching? Perhaps old habits die hard? Yes. But this system of exploitation has almost completely inverted itself in one working generation. In the 1970s, part-time faculty members made up 20% of the population. In 1987, it rose to 40% (Bosquet 201). Now? It’s around 75%, and that number increases daily. The coursework, however, has remained archaic

and not caught up with the hiring trends.

Simply peruse any graduate or doctoral program across the nation. Classes include Postmodern Literature, Comparative Literary Theory Applied to Traditional and Special Literatures, Observation in Teaching English, Topics in British Literature Before 1660, Second Language Teaching, Teaching Shakespeare / The Novel, and the list goes on. Is there anything wrong with these classes? No, but they are simply tailored to those entering the college classroom, and as statistics point out, many of us are not going that route.

More than ever, in our fast-paced digital world, employers want strong writers. According to Kaleigh Moore, a contributor to *Inc.*, there has been a spike in majors like English and Communications for companies due to their rhetorical skill sets. She states:

Recent research proves that written communication skills are at the top of employers' wish lists. According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers, **73.4% of employers** want a candidate with strong written communication skills. Written communication was the number three most desired quality overall, behind leadership skills and ability to work as a team member . . . Additionally, 75% of employers noted that they wanted a stronger focus on written communication skills at the college level.

(1-2)

Furthermore, it has been stated because of their abilities, they're easier to understand and communicate with, which makes interaction easier as a whole.

It could be suggested that English Departments at every level become more reasonable, and perhaps more realistic, with their core curriculums. Instead of Topics in Victorian

Literature, why not Advanced Technical and Scientific Writing, Seminar in Professional Writing, Writing for the Media, Studies in Public Relations, Speech Writing / Grant Writing, Editing, and so on? One simply needs to look at the writing jobs posted (grant writing, science writing, website development, public relations, metadata manager, advertising, marketing, and lobbyist) to know this is the future of the English major.

And for those who still think majoring in English will result in a low paying job, and even worse, selling out one's soul, newer websites have taken to listing salaries for entry level positions clear up to six figures, which include advertising manager, lawyer, and public relations manager. Geteducated.com states:

. . . take an English major job in advertising and work your way to advertising manager. This career is certainly tough, requiring you to develop every aspect of advertising, from budgets to conceptions to execution. You'll guide research, create long and short-term plans, and meet with clients to provide advice or sell your services. Add in hiring talent and negotiating prices, and you have a full career that will keep you plenty busy . . . The average adverting manager makes \$127,560 a year, making it one of the best jobs for English majors. The top ten will make roughly \$208,000, creating even greater earning potential. The job also has consistent growth, sitting at 9% between 2014 and 2024.

("Best Jobs for English Majors" 3)

With the rise of electronic media, writers are in demand. College professors teaching dated classes from the 1600s are not. Therefore, it only makes sense that the core curriculums change

with the times to better prepare their graduates for the market. Or at least one that is hiring with reasonable prospects.

Improve Working Conditions

After graduate school comes job prospects, and in a perfect world, adjuncts would receive a livable wage with retirement and benefits. This must come from the top down in terms of administrative values. Another large part of the problem, according to Herb Childress in his new book – *The Adjunct Underclass: How America's Colleges Betrayed Their Faculty, Their Students and Their Mission* – is current graduate system landscape, which is simply not sustainable. He states:

Like any ecosystem, there are innumerable influences. Some of them come from the changing nature of higher ed -- its broader participation, its reconfiguration to vocationalism, the changing technological landscape, the changing mix of student choices about majors. Some of them come from overstocking the lake with one species, putting 50,000 new Ph.D.s a year into a system that can sustain 10,000 and letting them fight for resources. And some of them come from the fact that higher ed is a component of a larger culture that accepts gig work as a norm, that protects consumers but not workers, that devalues work done by women, that faces fundamental demographic shifts and a 30-year population trough on the heels of a gigantic boom. All of those forces favor contingency. (Flaherty 4)

Knowing that the system is broken, what can full-time faculty, chairs, and deans do to improve the everyday lives of adjuncts right off the bat?

1. Office space. In every college across the nation, space is always an issue. As a result of it, many part-timers hold office hours at a random table or bench in the library. Or if they do get a tiny windowless office, it is shared by 15+ people. This is problematic for the obvious reasons (noise level, no privacy whatsoever, and students discuss sensitive issues).

While virtual office hours are now becoming a trend and mandatory for some adjunct faculty members, with mixed feelings on both sides, every composition professor knows there is always more than one question to answer (Camacho). A face-to-face conversation is necessary to help a student with brainstorming, flow, and grammatical issues. Therefore, it would be helpful if *more* than one office was set aside to house adjunct faculty and/or if full-time faculty members share their offices. Master keys can be made, and MWF vs. TR schedules can be posted on the door.

2. Grant voting rights. According to Tony Scott, author of “Introduction: The Composition Issue,” only 7% of those of teach undergraduate courses are full-time, tenure faculty. He states, “Of the remaining 93%, 18% of introductory undergraduate courses are taught by full-time, non-tenure-track faculty; 33% are taught by part-time faculty, and 42% are taught by graduate teaching assistants” (1).

And guess who is making most of their decisions? Chairs who have 1. never taught the class or 2. would most likely opt out due to the intensive paperwork load. Adjuncts teaching introductory courses need a say so in the following matters:

- number of essays
- book choices
- pedagogies
- classroom policies
- attendance
- rooms (traditional vs. smart)
- hybrids (going digital one day a week)

While some of these issues are standard departmental policies, such as number of essays and attendance rules, there should still be some wiggle room. This is simply a common sense issue at the end of the day if more than 90% of faculty members are teaching survey courses, they should have more control over their classroom pedagogies and autonomy.

3. Invite everyone to the meetings. Adjuncts being invited to departmental meetings varies across the board. In some departments, it's open to full-timers only. For others, part-timers are included, but it's often hard to attend because of duties outside work or the "freeway flyer" lifestyle, which is driving from one college to another, sometimes three a day, in order to piece together a semi-decent salary (DeGennaro).

However, one reason it might be beneficial to attend is to know the academic landscape in terms of prospects. In other words, is there a future for me at this school? At Florida Institute of Technology, we are good about hiring our own, and meetings give everyone a heads up on sabbaticals, retirements, and, sadly, recent deaths. Also, an honest discussion with the chair at

the very beginning is worthwhile in terms of knowing one's expectations (temporary fill in or full-time position opening up in the fall) at the beginning of the term.

4. Webpage recognition. While adjuncts are exploited across all disciplines, the percentages are higher in the humanities, with part-timers often outnumbering full-timers. Why so? According to Professor Chad Engbers, co-chair of the English Department at Calvin College, adjuncts typically teach College Writing 101 and 102 because of the high student demand. He states, "As tenure-track colleagues have retired from the English department, the college hasn't had enough money to replace them, so there are simply fewer people to do that work" (Parks 1). Furthermore, when tenure-track faculty get course releases for committee work or other projects outside of classes, they typically do not wish to teach survey courses.

Therefore, if adjuncts do all the heavy lifting in the department, with the backbone being freshman composition and literature courses, they should be counted as contributing members of the department, complete with photos, educational backgrounds, teaching schedules, and contact information. On some webpages, they are listed. Others list full-time only, which at best is a microaggression, and at worst, an attempt to hide the obvious exploitation of the labor issue within humanities.

5. Conference opportunities. As stated above, adjuncts (up to 93%) do most of the heavy lifting in freshman courses, which introduce students to the college and discipline (Scott 1). More than ever, they need to be on the frontlines of what is happening in the academy, and this includes attending local and nationwide conferences.

Sadly, however, “only 26% of part-time faculty paid by the course receive funds to attend professional meetings” (Scott 1). As with most things, this comes down to a money issue, but wouldn’t it be beneficial to equip the professors seeing the most students, some well over 100+ per semester, with materials, pedagogies, and a strong networking circle in order for them to succeed?

One such agency that has stepped up to the plate is PrecariCorps. It is an organization run by “a tight-knit group of dedicated, non-affiliated adjunct advocates with diverse backgrounds” (“About Us” 1). Donations are accepted on the website (<https://precaricorps.org/>), and they are used to improve the livelihoods of adjuncts by helping out with a bill or providing traveling funds to a conference. They also offer educational material, create a searchable archive relevant to contingent labor issues, and conduct research about the population’s role in universities, within the economy, and how they affect faculty / student populations.

Restructure English Departments

In addition to improving the daily lives of adjuncts, course loads can make or break an individual. Inside every department, there are major divisions (full-time vs. part-time, new blood vs. old school, techie vs. typewriter, undergrad vs. grad, and so on). And sometimes, these hairline fractures have the ability to divide and conquer within, leaving some academics to abandon their posts entirely. Two such divisions, which are prominent at many institutions, are the literature vs. composition split and researcher vs. teacher tracks.

Regarding the literature vs. composition rift, this dissonance has been one of the most quoted passages in Robert Scholes book, *The Rise and Fall of English*. He began by talking about his service on the Modern Language Association's Commission on Writing and Literature, which was tasked to reconcile the divide between composition and literature in the humanities field. He stated:

. . . the culture of English departments was structured by an invidious binary opposition between writing teachers and literary scholars that could not be improved by tinkering. Because the profession was organized founded upon this distinction, it could be undone only by a deconstructive process striking at its roots . . . Teachers of literature became the priests and theologians of English, while teachers of composition were the nuns, barred from the priesthood, doing the shitwork of the field. This structure could be undone only by an assault on the notion of literature upon which it was founded. (35-36)

It's somewhat insulting to say this, that one is simply better than another, but literature has always been viewed as "superior." Therefore, the loftier (full-time) professors get to teach it exclusively.

According to Marc Bousquet, author *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation*, this plays into contingent exploitation and academic snobbery. Because service courses, like Writing Rhetoric 101 and 102, must be taught in mass production, cheap labor is needed. He states, "Under the current system of academic work, the university clearly does not prefer the best or most experienced teachers; it prefers the cheapest teachers" (204).

Perhaps it would be beneficial to even out the workload. (Hopeful? Yes.) It is a given that most incoming freshmen must take a composition course. Therefore, more professors are needed. But according to Colleen Flaherty, author of “So Much to Do, So Little Time,” the average professor reported working 61 hours a week – more than 50% over the traditional 9:00 to 5:00 work week. She added:

They worked 10 hours per day Monday to Friday and about that much on Saturday and Sunday combined. Perhaps surprisingly, full professors reported working slightly longer hours both during the week and on weekends than associate and assistant professors, as well as chairs. (2)

Now, couple that with four-five classes of composition courses at multiple schools. Given the average class size is 20-25 students, that’s 100+ essays easily.

As stated by Scholes earlier, this split has been a long-standing issue for decades. It may never completely go away. But one sure way to burn out even the most enthusiastic adjunct away is a steady diet of 101 classes. The student skill levels vary. ESL essays often take longer. And if they’re all coming in at once, it’s a non-stop grading marathon Friday-Sunday, even for speed readers. Allowing adjuncts to teach the occasional literature course would be an incentive, a small one at best, to simply break up the monotony and utilize other facets of their graduate degree.

Secondly, piggybacking on literature vs. composition division lies the researcher vs. teacher estrangement. They almost go hand-in-hand. Some professors write books; others are the worker bees. Again, there is an unnecessary arrogance that goes along with this, thinking

one is better than the other, but they are both needed in the academy. Furthermore, not everyone wants to do both. According to Emily Toth (who goes by her pseudonym Ms. Mentor), this plan does come with inherent risks:

‘But I just want to teach!’ you wail. Without a publication or two, or some unique talent, you're apt to languish in the adjunct pool (making \$2,000 a course with no job security) for as long as you're committed to academe. Publishing, whether in obscure journals or popular magazines, will give you a name, a face, and a distinction. If you want to move from a community college to a liberal-arts college or a research university, it's the only path. (4)

Knowing this, wouldn't it make more sense for administrations to create two tracks (teaching and research) in order to give faculty members options? And if adjuncts were given more stability through a teaching only track, they could better serve their institution in a number of ways, including:

- service to the school via committees
- greater availability to the students
- more investment to one program vs. three at a time
- new course development and programs
- more academic freedom
- job security from one semester to the next / less turnover
- better academic quality through preparation (Pilati 2)

This plan may seem optimistic, but it's already working in places like the University of Denver, where non-tenure track faculty are multiyear contracts (some with up to five years) with options in their courses.

In the article, "More Than Adjuncts," the author states critics are already whispering: will it work in the long run, lead to fewer tenure-line appointments, and will non-tenure-track faculty members feel the difference? "But it's already clear that Denver's ahead of the curve in rethinking the professor role, and that its model might be exportable to other institutions grappling with how to better incorporate their adjuncts into the faculty" (Flaherty 2). Thus, it can be done, and Denver is leading the charge.

Just Don't Go

The final suggestion is the divide between the psychic wage and logic. There are obvious things administrations can do to improve the lives of adjuncts. Graduate programs should get with the hiring times to adequately prepare its graduates, and English Departments could be restructured to give professors more options. But the last option is often the most difficult because there's what the heart wants (a full-time job in academia) and what the head knows (grim academic landscape).

In 2006, Thomas Benton wrote "So You Want to go to Grad School?," which was featured in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. In short, it warned students thinking about grad school in the humanities to reconsider due to the exploitative nature of the system and his own personal experiences on the market.

Still, students remained hopeful, being told by their well-meaning but outmoded professors – “There are always jobs for good people,” and “Don't worry, massive retirements are coming soon, and then there will be plenty of positions available” (Benton 1). So, like lambs to the slaughter, students formed an orderly line out the door because:

- They received high grades and a lot of praise from their professors, and they are not finding similar encouragement outside of an academic environment. They want to return to a context in which they feel validated.
- They are emerging from 16 years of institutional living: a clear, step-by-step process of advancement toward a goal, with measured outcomes, constant reinforcement and support, and clearly defined hierarchies.
- They'll spend a few years studying literature . . . they will simply look for a job when the market has improved. And, you know, all those baby boomers have to retire someday, and when that happens, there will be jobs available in academe. (Benton 2-3)

The problem, as previously stated, is the seemingly overnight shift of the academy. Thus, while these professors are ill-informed, they are just going off what they knew of the hiring practices when they applied. In the 1970s, adjuncts were kept to a minimum, so being a professor was a good job.

In the years in between, the academic model shifted to one of corporate greed, focusing on “corporation, managerialism, and casualization” (Bousquet 206). When a full-time professor retired, he/she was replaced with an adjunct. It saves colleges millions, and because of the

oversupply and overproduction of Ph.D.s in the market place, it is easy pickings.

Despite all of this, it is hard to tell young people that are full of energy and enthusiasm not to go, not to follow their passions as we're advised to do in much of literature. In 2009, Benton wrote a follow up article called "Graduate School in the Humanities: Just Don't Go" citing crippling debt as a red flag factor (as opposed to income earned) and offering only a few small circumstances in which one might entertain graduate school in the humanities:

- You are independently wealthy, and you have no need to earn a living for yourself or provide for anyone else.
- You can rely on a partner to provide all of the income and benefits needed by your household.
- You are earning a credential for a position that you already hold -- such as a high-school teacher -- and your employer is paying for it. (Benton 5)

Not finding a full-time position makes many feel ashamed or embarrassed, like they did something wrong, but Benton adds the system is now rigged in the favor of administrations. Cheap labor is exploitable, and there's not shortage of us. The only thing we can do is choose whether to participate or not.

Conclusion

The glory days of being a full-time professor with a livable wage, medical benefits, and retirement contributions are currently behind us. "Ph.D. students are facing an academic labor market in which, as of 2016, postsecondary institutions hired 30,865 contingent faculty

members, compared with 21,511 tenure-track professors” (Hanlon 1). And the death of Margaret Mary Vojtko, who died essentially homeless and earning less than \$25,000 a year with a full load at Duquesne University, only recently brought this issue into the mainstream media.

This article chronicled four solutions (tweak graduate programs to make them more contemporary, improve working conditions of current adjuncts, spread out the workload, or simply forgo graduate studies all together). Small steps, indeed. But things could improve, and they are by professors fighting back against the system. According to the article, “The University is a Ticking Time Bomb,” the wheels of motion are beginning to take shape:

Last year saw a wave of K-12 teacher strikes across the country: in Arizona, California, Colorado, Georgia, Kentucky, North Carolina, Oklahoma, and West Virginia. And now postsecondary faculty members have joined in, with recent strikes at Virginia Commonwealth University and at Wright State University over a range of issues, including health care, increased reliance on contingent labor, and low pay. (Hanlon 1) And in every case, although with much resistance in the beginning, they succeeded.

The first National Adjunct Walkout Day took place on February 25, 2015, which included walkouts, sit-ins, and informational tables about contingent labor. The reviews were mixed, with much greater successes in unionized northern states, but as Kevin Mahoney states, it has to start somewhere because enough is enough. He adds:

At some point, fear and isolation give way to anger and outrage. We saw some of that outrage last fall when adjuncts organized an online action to exposing the conditions of exploitation that today’s adjuncts face. Adjuncts lit up Twitter using the hashtag,

#BurnItDown. The action was visceral, heartfelt and heartbreaking. And the action brought together thousands of adjuncts who knew it was time they could stay silent no more. #BurnItDown was a flash in the pan in the wave of adjunct organizing over the past several years. That flash served to turn up the heat. (4-5)

Indeed, the adjunct crisis in the humanities, specifically in English Departments, is heartbreaking on all levels. It's not fair to the adjuncts, nor is it fair to the freshman students who want a professor that is available and not burnt out between three different institutions. They often say it's darker right before the light, and as Hanlon states, perhaps it's time to call a lie a lie. This system is simply corrupt, inhumane, and unsustainable. We are collectively all "marching toward the cliff's edge," and something must give before it breaks (6).

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