

“What you do unto the least of these: Adjuncts and painful trends in Higher Education”  
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I was invited to participate on this panel for the rather inglorious reason that I am a poster child for the underemployed adjunct in the Humanities. I received my Ph.D. in 2000 and I have served as either a part-time or full-time adjunct ever since at no fewer than seven separate institutions of higher learning, all while writing and publishing seven books and several articles. This year I actually have a one-year, full-time replacement position at the University of Oregon in the Department of History, where I and one other full-time adjunct are filling the gap left by the loss of SIX faculty last year and numerous other faculty taking sabbaticals.

So, basically, I've learned a few things about how universities treat adjuncts, and I've watched first-hand how these policies have been extremely detrimental to the adjuncts themselves, the students, the *tenured* faculty and ultimately the universities. I offer here a bit of my experience and the repercussions I've seen in a convenient “Dos and Don'ts” format on how to care for your adjuncts.

**DO give your adjuncts offices**, even a cubical. First off, believe it or not, students find it weird and even disorienting when their teachers don't have offices. At one school where I taught I was put into a storage room in a different building from the where the department (and the rest of the faculty offices) were located. It took two weeks for my students to find me, and they all had the same, really confused looks on their faces when they did.

More importantly, sometimes students want to discuss matters with an instructor IN PRIVATE. This is perfectly reasonable. In our day and age of student privacy concerns, a student does have the right to discuss, say, her grades with the teacher without the rest of the student body being able to overhear. Sometimes students want to discuss more personal matters pertaining to the class. In one of my classes years ago we were discussing the rape narratives in Christine de Pizan's *Book of the City of Ladies*. Later one of my students came to meet with me to talk about how she found those stories therapeutic, after she and her mother had both been raped when someone had broken into their home. The whole point of the humanities is to provide students with the history of their species to learn from, and the fact that a student could use such tales from a Renaissance feminist in her own healing process was exactly the point of education. But I highly doubt she would have been so comfortable speaking with me out in the hall, or a faculty lounge, with who knows whom eavesdropping.

From a practical perspective, an office gives the instructor someplace to give make-up exams and quizzes. You have no idea what hell this can be unless you've ever tried to give one without an office. Shared public spaces like libraries are full of

distractions. Without the office context, students are functionally punished for getting sick, or caring for a sick child, or having a flat tire, or observing a religious holiday. Although some colleges have offices responsible for administering make-up tests, these may only be open for limited hours on specific days (as at one college where I taught), forcing the student to disrupt his schedule to take the make-up. One of my former students had to take off work, drive an hour to the college, to be told that the office *lost* the test, and so she'd have to come back again. Without an office, there is no good way to accommodate the needs of students, both physically as in the case of make-up tests, or psychologically.

**DON'T have adjuncts teach the same class over and over and over and over.** I once taught an intellectual heritage type class at a **large** university, a class that every last student was required to take. The university thus hired scores of adjuncts to teach nothing but this class, three and then four times per semester, with the class sizes rising from 25 to 33 students per class, and where each student, we were told, should get "specialized, individual treatment." Now, first of all, if you singlehandedly teach over 120 students per term, they are NOT getting personalized treatment, other than the vague possibility that you might remember their names. More importantly, though, teaching the same class too many times both in a term and over terms has deleterious effects.

In one term, other than the understandable problem of having too many students, it gets really hard to remember what one has gone over in any individual class. Material that you thought you covered here is unknown to the students, because you are confusing them with the afternoon class, or yesterday's class. By the end of the day, you are extremely tired, so your later students do not get the energy or *patience* that the morning students did.

More problematic is that the class gets a redundant feeling, and inevitably your expectations for the students go up. What seemed like a fine term paper topic six semesters ago now sounds trite and unimaginative. Having gotten bored with the basics of the class, you start to teach more esoteric aspects of the texts in question, leaving behind the students who, just like your first class, need the basics, not the doctoral thesis. These tendencies combine to decimate the students' grades, and unfairly to them they do worse at college because you are bored. And because these are usually freshman-level courses that are being mass-taught, the students do not get the individual treatment that they need at this stage of the game, and they are more likely to be frustrated into leaving by an entry-level class that is unexpectedly difficult and unduly harshly graded. By my last class at this institution, not one student got above a B- in my class, and one third of them failed.

And, yes, this *does* happen in the field of Classics. I once had a job interview at a university that is semi-infamous for, every single semester, sending out a desperate cry

that they have about twelve Classics classes starting in a month with NO ONE to teach them. You'd think they would have figured out that they need about four more faculty, but they always seem to get the adjuncts... Anyway, the interview was for a myth specialist. As someone who has taught Greek, Near Eastern, Celtic, and Nordic myth, I figured I'd be pretty idea for them. In the interview, though, the actual position requirements came out. The department ran about three or four sections of Greek myth every term, and they wanted someone to teach all of them, every term, every year. They specifically wanted a "Myth Specialist" so they could get the dean to permit them to make the same person teach that class over and over and over again.

**DON'T be cheap.** A part-time adjunct is still a scholar in your field, with all the same scholarly needs that you have. More, in fact, because he needs a job, and you have one (to borrow a phrase from Sokrates). He needs to go to conferences and to publish in order to advance in any way in academia.

But hiring committees and universities undermine adjuncts fiscally, and I'm not referring here to small pay checks. As many universities have policies linking pay to publication, departments are more likely to hire the wholly unpublished, unpracticed novice ABD or recent graduate than a Ph.D. with teaching and publishing experience. Once when I had about three books on my c.v. I was turned down for a one-year position that went instead to an ABD with an encyclopedia entry to her name. A colleague of mine in the department later told me that I was rejected the moment the Dean looked at my c.v. and told the department that there would be a \$20,000 difference in our annual salaries, according to university policy, and if they really wanted me the difference would come out of the departmental budget. I understand why they went with the ABD, but I was pretty upset to find out, three books in, that those books were actually costing me jobs.

For the record, this isn't just the case for adjuncts; this effects tenure-track hiring as well, especially at entry level-positions. The longer it takes new faculty to publish that book that makes them eligible for tenure, the longer the university does not have to offer a raise with promotion. This means that job candidates with the *least* experience of any kind wind up being the most promising candidates. Think Darwin, folks: You're going to render extinct the academes who actually try to contribute to the field.

Furthermore, departments are far, far less likely to fund adjuncts for things like conferences and travel, on the grounds that they are there to teach, not do research. Thus the poorest academics are the ones getting the least help when it comes to doing exactly what they are supposed to be doing as academics. And really, we all learn a LOT by going to conferences, hearing the latest work in the field, making contact with new colleagues and new bibliographies, and we pass these benefits along to our students. By denying funding to adjuncts, universities make the learning experience worse for their students.

Most Importantly:

**DO back your adjuncts.** *The adjuncts are not there to shield you from the students.* If anything, it is the responsibility of the tenured faculty to verify that the adjuncts are holding their own with the students and are providing the same quality of education as the students would receive with the regular faculty, *even if the students bitch about it.*

Instead, as far too many adjuncts will tell you, *any* complaint from a student threatens the adjunct's position, as faculty find it's easier to have an adjunct who never forces the Chair to deal with a problem student. This makes wimps out of adjuncts, and destroys the quality of education provided. Students never complain about a teacher who teaches nothing, assigns nothing, and gives straight As; I have seen this for a fact. The adjunct who pushes students to do well and who gives bad grades when deserved will be excoriated by at least one student, and that's all it takes to get fired.

I once had a student who did not manage her time well. She started her term paper less than 20 *hours* (yes, hours) before it was due, when she was also supposed to be studying for the final. She flipped out, never turned in her paper, and never showed up for the final. Based on the policy stated on my syllabus, she failed the class (although I would have given her an Incomplete if she ever contacted me, which she did not). Six months later the student petitioned the department to let her make up the final and hand in her paper, which I thought was hideously unfair to the other students who made the effort to get their work in on time. I refused, but did offer to grant a retroactive Withdrawal to the student so that the F would not appear on her transcript. Instead, her grade was changed from an F to a C+, my next class in the department was cancelled, and I was informed by e-mail that my services were no longer needed. The student needed this class *to graduate*, you see. Since then, I've been fired from departments for giving bad grades to other graduating students, students who failed both midterm and final, students who blatantly plagiarized term papers.

So, why is this actually problematic for you, the securely tenured? Well, for one thing, the student who does not learn the basics of, say, writing composition isn't going to do very well in your advanced Classical Literature class. Lousy teaching at the lower levels, where most adjuncts teach, creates problems at the higher levels, where more regular faculty teach. And, believe me, *the students will think it's you.* They've had college-level classes; they were easy, they didn't have to memorize anything, and one complaint caused the teacher to give way. Certainly they will try this technique on you, so let's hope the Dean feels compelled to back you, the way you should be backing your adjuncts.

And it's not only the students who get used to wimp instructors—*so does the administration.* It is ridiculously easy to solve a student complaint by changing the grade and firing the adjunct. It's so easy that administrators become comfortable with using a similar technique on the tenured faculty. At that same institution where I was

fired over the student who did not take her final, several other adjuncts started to notice that their grade rosters were being changed without their knowledge. *Then the regular faculty started having the same issue.* Professor 1s would find that their rosters had been “adjusted”, and when they complained about it, they were invited to take early retirement, the tenured equivalent of being fired. But they could not enforce their own grading policies. Several excellent professors left the university and were replaced with adjuncts, who, if they know what’s good for them, will spoon-feed pabulum to the students and give good grades under any circumstances. And the students will come to expect this. From everyone.

### Conclusion

Universities hire adjuncts because we are cheap and disposable, plain and simple. And we are the ultimate sign that universities care little about the students. Being frequently severely overworked we provide no specialized attention to those students who need it most. Without adequate resources we cannot attend to our students as is desirable or necessary. Being easily victimized we teach both students and administrators how to victimize. If I might borrow another phrase from Sokrates (you might have learned about him in a Western Civ. class if you had a good teacher): Teachers should be here to make students better people, and thus *truly* happy. The way it’s going now, adjuncts are encouraged simply to make students *think* they’re happy. It is just to no one.