

DEAR EDITOR

In the Fall 2008 issue of this journal (“Seeking the Path to Adjunct Justice at Marquette University,” *Thought & Action*, Vol 24, Fall 2008, 47-55) I reported on a move toward justice for Non-Tenure-Track (NTT) faculty at Marquette University. Since then, for reasons of competitive recruitment of graduate students, graduate teaching assistants—not other NTT’s—can now be included in the university health benefits plan. However, I can report no improvement in the overuse and under compensation of NTT’s, but I will report on a hopeful process underway in the academic senate.

As elsewhere in the academy, the use of contingency faculty at Marquette University is not a response to an unforeseen surge in student population. Rather it has become a bedrock policy that privileges tenured faculty and has become a standardized assumption in administrative budgeting. Brick and mortar continue to trump instructional needs as hundreds of millions of dollars go to new buildings while in some units more than 50 percent of undergrad students are taught by NTT’s, “the highly educated working poor,”\* who lack both academic freedom and just compensation. The adjunct salary per course is \$3,350.00.


Though the first move toward adjunct justice began in the Theology Department, interest there has softened. My motion to institute a standing committee for adjunct justice in the department failed and my suggestion to entertain unionization got no support, even though popes for more than a century have supported unions to defend the rights of workers.

While the category “permanent adjuncts” was used in the theology department as recently as 2008, that category has been dropped and those in that position will not be continued as teachers even though they may have served for as much as eighteen years as adjuncts and taught thousands of our students. The decision to stop the “permanent adjunct” position can be justified but the refusal to grandfather those who have long served into another teaching arrangement cannot be justified.

It would be defensible if the senate were to decide that in the future a Ph.D. graduate from the department hired as an adjunct, could not be continued in that status beyond three or four years. If the adjunct during that time received a good salary and benefits, s/he would have the opportunity to publish and network in their search for a tenure track position here or elsewhere. The time limit would also be a hedge against recruiting graduate students beyond what the tenure track market will bear. This would work against producing Ph.D.s who never succeed in attaining a tenure-track position.

The Marquette senate plans a systematic and thorough study of all units with their distinct needs. They will interview all concerned including adjuncts before passing judgment on those units using academic and fairness standards. If the senate is to be successful it will have to open up the sealed temple doors of university economic planning. Calls for new tenure-track lines meet the “no funds available” defense, and faculty are asked to take that on faith, leaving the core issue of priorities to administrators alone. The blame for that does not go only to administrators. An apathetic tenured faculty makes the unconscionable secrecy of university economic planning and prioritizing possible at Marquette and elsewhere.

Ethics requires truth in advertising. The “product” offered by universities is changing as the

under-paid and un-free do much or most of the teaching, as research opportunities fade, and as teacher/student interaction is diminished because of the plight of the NTT's. Universities should be required to report up-front to prospective students and their parents how many of their students are taught by such hampered teachers. Accrediting agencies should make it a priority in their assessment of all colleges and universities, as should magazines that offer reports on academic institution. I look forward to reporting back on the actions in the Marquette University senate. It could send a signal to the broader academe. 

\*See Scott Jaschik, "Call to Arms for Adjuncts...From An Administrator," October 14, 2008, available at <http://insidehighered.com/news/2008/10/14/adjunct>

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DEAR EDITOR

The argument in Alexander Stanoyevitch's essay "Controlling Grade Inflation" in the Fall 2008 issue of *Thought & Action* is vitiated by an unexamined assumption—namely, that student achievement in every class, even across various disciplines, must always fall into a measurable bell curve. In my experience that assumption is simply unwarranted.

Stanoyevitch's suggestion that "instructors whose grades deviate significantly from departmental averages should be asked to justify the discrepancies or to adjust their grading schemes" is a recipe for intrusive meddling in the domain of individual faculty members. If a school hires someone in the belief that he or she is competent to teach a class, by what right or reason do colleagues presume to second guess the grades that this teacher has assigned?

The only person who can determine what an individual student deserves as a grade is the instructor who taught the student, marked his or her papers and exams, and listened to the student's contribution to classroom discussion. No one else has the empirical knowledge to determine the grade that student should receive. The notion that we can statistically predict how a group of students will perform in a class has to be proven. Until then, it remains a notion based on bell-curve prejudice. That Stanoyevitch favors this notion is clear from his ideal departmental histogram, where the majority of grades are in the C range, tapering off at either end to A or F.

A number of factors that Stanoyevitch does not consider may account for a larger proportion of high grades in a class. Perhaps the professor is an interesting and provocative teacher who evokes the best efforts of students. Perhaps the material in a particular introductory class is fairly elementary and easily mastered. Perhaps the presence of a number of experienced majors in an upper-level class in their own discipline will guarantee a high degree of achievement. Or perhaps a group of well-prepared and highly motivated first-year students has happened to come together in a given section. Any or all of these possibilities could make for a final grade sheet filled with A and B grades. Does Stanoyevitch think these things impossible?

Moreover, when Stanoyevitch refers disparagingly to instructors “whose grades deviate significantly from departmental averages,” he says something that I would not expect from a professional mathematician. A departmental average, by definition, is the average of the grades given by all instructors, including those whose grades are supposedly inflated. The departmental average is what it is because of the input of every department member. By what possible logic can one complain that a professor’s grades “deviate from the departmental average” when in fact those particular grades were integral to the computation of that average? This would be comparable to arguing that while there is a measurable distribution of red, white, and yellow roses in a florist’s shop, it is somehow unfair or disproportionate for there to be a group of red roses on a particular stand, and in consequence that stand should be compelled to reflect the overall distribution of roses in the shop as a whole.

Grade inflation may or may not be a problem in the American university. If it is, however, it would be best to approach the question without relying on dubious assumptions and bad mathematics. [nea](#)

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DEAR EDITOR

I read with great interest (and guilty satisfaction) P.M. Forni’s article “The Civil Classroom in the Age of the Net” (Fall, 2008). The interest comes from the fact that my colleagues echo similar complaints. The guilty satisfaction is that I have avoided these problems (largely because I am now teaching entirely online).

Forni says that students must be punctual for every class (no problem, our online interaction is not synchronous) not make or receive telephone calls (no problem if they multi-task, I can’t see it) be mindful of time constraints (no problem, since we are not limited to a fifty minute period) respect what I and fellow students say (not that much of a problem, since I can delete any posted message).

But Forni’s list of faculty commitments still applies for online instructors.

I will be punctual for every class (it is even worse: I must have materials available promptly and respond to students’ posts within hours, not just two or three times a week) Give everybody a fair share of my attention (and it turns out to be much more time per student) I will prepare you for tests (and have to figure out ways to do that without the traditional synchronous lecture with immediate questions and responses). [nea](#)

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DEAR EDITOR

In the Fall 2008 *Thought & Action*, P.M. Forni, in an article entitled “The Civil Classroom in the Age of the Net,” recommends a commonly-seen tactic referred to as a “contract” or “covenant” with the students in the class. Professor Forni writes (p.21): “Read the covenant to your students on the first day of classes and ask them whether they are willing to abide by it. You can certainly make it part of the syllabus, but if you prefer a more memorable option, bring copies on separate sheets. Then, after the students’ approval, you will staple the sheets to the syllabi just before distributing them to your class. Either way, it is of utmost importance that you do not change the original stipulations during the course of the term.”

Personally, I think this is one of the more corrosive practices used in colleges these days. First of all, the practice is morally ambiguous in that it demands agreement to something called a “contract” without an opportunity for fair negotiation on both sides. If a student actually does not agree to the presented covenant, what then? In truth, the point of negotiation is when the student formally registers for the class. When instructors bully a classroom of students into a signing statement on the first day of class, we’re giving a terrible lesson into the gravity and consideration they should take before signing their name to any document.

Secondly, there is a message usually delivered along with these “contracts” along the lines of, “the covenant is an ironclad agreement that can never be broken.” That is again a misrepresentation of how contracts are used in the business world. Contracts attempt to establish principles of intent, but they are routinely re-negotiated and amended. When a disagreement erupts between parties, the existing contract may be used as a starting point for discussions, but if agreement cannot be reached, then arbitration or a court case may result. If this were not so, the entire field of contract law would not exist.

Thirdly, the common usage of these so-called “covenants” causes some students in classes where these contracts are not used (such as the classes that I teach) to believe that without a signed contract, they have no behavioral or performance requirements whatsoever. Obviously this is not the case (again, it’s the moment of course registration where they agree to abide by the professor’s classroom policies), but I have seen students confused by the practice.

The classroom “contract” or “covenant” of behavior is a confusing, frankly deceptive practice, and it should be avoided by conscientious instructors. 

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DEAR EDITOR

I’d like to thank Douglas Harrison for his article, “Scholarly Voice and Professional Identity in the Internet Age.” As a college writing instructor and coordinator of writing tutoring who also blogs and writes plays, I’ve been thinking more and more about the gap between writing that exists in a close-to-vacu-

um and writing that is actually exposed to hundreds of people in an open forum. It's often difficult to inspire students to think meaningfully about "audience" when their audience is basically me or another professor. Without perceived relevance in the outside world, papers are treated by students like museum pieces, crafted to please the "curator"—in this case, whichever professor is doing the grading. Students trade tips like, "Oh, put a lot of detail in; she likes that," as though the only function of their words was to gain approval from the professor. No doubt, the academy has been complicit in perpetuating this attitude and thus plays a role in changing it.

For a long time, I simply accepted students' disconnect from their own work as the status quo, a fact of immaturity that I hoped would remedy itself once they became more invested in their chosen area of study. But when I began blogging, that perspective changed. Suddenly, I was writing intellectual, currently relevant pieces for a wide audience. It was by seeing the purpose of what I'd been teaching for so long—clarity, specificity, audience-appropriate rhetoric—function in reality that I began to see that perceived authenticity might be the way to that holy grail of writing instruction: getting the student to take ownership of his or her writing. Indeed, my class this year came closer than ever to seizing the reigns of their words and caring more about communicating authentically than getting a spot on the museum's top shelf. After reading Harrison's article, I am inspired to go further next semester and make blogging a regular feature of my freshman English course.

I like to tell students that writing is a form of communication. To make this seemingly obvious point more meaningful, I draw a picture of two bodies on the board and write a list of what's inside each: thoughts, beliefs, experiences, relationships, superstitions, dreams, opinions, then draw arrows from the first body to the second. For writing to be writing, I say, there must be something coming from the first person and reaching the other person. I belabor this obvious point because it's actually not so obvious. Many students are under the impression that they have nothing to say and couldn't write it if they did; so they invest their time, instead, constructing a strange circuit of mirrors that will, if properly arranged, convey the impression of learned and competent thought. The inherent authenticity of blogging makes these mirror-circuits irrelevant and forces students to stand exposed, in all their naivete, ready to try and fail and try again and, over time, to learn, not which traits make it into professors' curio cabinets, but how to communicate powerfully and effectively to a wide audience.

This past year, I realized that the fundamental reason I teach writing is political. It is to help facilitate democracy. The new media landscape may be one of the best tools that's come about to promote democracy since the town square. But to make sure that it is truly democratic, young and old, male and female, people of all ethnicities must have the confidence and ability to be visible in the new "town square." An instructor like Douglas Harrison who makes himself vulnerable to public scrutiny can help inspire students to become vibrant participants in the shaping of a truly democratic world. 

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