Disruptive Innovations for Adjunct Faculty: Common Sense for the Common Good

by Gary Rhoades

The employment practices, working conditions, and curricular delivery models being paraded through higher-education policy circles and campuses nationwide as so-called “new realities” and “innovative answers” make no sense. In truth, these practices have long been failing our students and country educationally, democratically, and economically. They undermine the common good. Not at all new, and not especially innovative, these decades-long patterns have eroded the quality and accessibility of public higher education, while at the same time increasing its costs. At their core is the “new faculty majority” of adjunct or contingent faculty, who now constitute two-thirds of the overall faculty workforce nationwide. Particularly prominent are faculty in part-time positions, who now constitute 49 percent of all faculty, including 70 percent in community colleges. But there also are growing numbers of full-time, non-tenure track faculty: now 19 percent of all faculty.

The patterns that particularly affect these contingent faculty members, and increasingly all faculty in some regards, are harmful to students and should be creatively challenged and changed by faculty. Specifically, there are at least three patterns that undermine educational quality: 1) the “just-in-time” hiring of faculty a few weeks or days before classes start; 2) the “at-will” conditions of employment that disconnect contingent faculty from their peers and students in time and place; and 3) the growing promotion and use of depersonalized curricular delivery mod-

Gary Rhoades is professor and director of the University of Arizona’s Center for the Study of Higher Education. His research focuses on the restructuring of academic institutions and professions, about which he wrote in his 1998 book, Managed Professionals, currently being updated. His annual chapter in the NEA Higher Education Almanac examines trends in collective bargaining agreements.
els that separate and alienate faculty and students from educational programs they utilize. Each of these patterns works against the interests not just of faculty, but also against the needs of students and the nation. Worse, these practices and patterns are particularly ill-suited to the changing demographics of the United States.

While policymakers and managers promote their own (un)reality of higher education, they ignore the genuine new reality. The growing prospective college student population in this country is lower-income, first-generation, students of color, as well as immigrants, documented and undocumented: those students who have thus far been dramatically underserved by higher education. Moreover, older, prospective students include growing numbers of veterans, adults without high school diplomas, and workers thrown out of work. Our common future and shared welfare is contingent upon higher education better serving these populations that, in some states now and in many states soon, will be the majority of our school-children. And yet, those students are the ones most likely to be in institutions with the most part-time faculty and the worst conditions of contingent faculty employment. Thus, our current path perpetuates and even heightens social inequity by race and class. The higher education achievement gap between underrepresented minorities and Anglos persists, as does the gap between lower and higher income students. At the same time, we are constructing new barriers to affordable, high quality education. That makes no sense.

In short, we must challenge and change the employment practices, working conditions, and curricular realities of the majority of the instructional workforce who disproportionately serve the growing majority of students. That is common sense for the common good. It is necessary, but not sufficient, to identify, document, and decry the current problematic conditions in the academy. It is up to academics to creatively find ways to counter those conditions and to also change them.

To enable that action, this article offers three no or low-cost disruptive innovations for contingent faculty, both unionized and not, that are grounded in common sense, in what we know works educationally for our students. These innovations can be advanced and undertaken by groups of faculty (unionized and non-unionized), including contingent faculty. They are reasonable and immediately achievable alternatives to nonsensical conditions of teaching and learning in higher education. They are common sense measures that will advance the common good.

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THREE NEW REALITIES THAT MAKE NO SENSE

As a foundation for understanding the need and value of the three disruptive innovations, this article first more fully describes the three “new realities” that define contingent faculty work.

“Just-in-time” hiring

A prevailing employment practice in the case of part-time faculty is “just-in-time” hiring. The practice leaves faculty not knowing until the last minute whether and what they will teach. Even those faculty members who are assigned class(es) a semester ahead of time can’t know if the class will, in fact, “make” or if they will be “bumped” in priority by a full-time or tenure track faculty member (full-time, non-tenure track faculty can also have their assignments “bumped” by tenure track faculty). Moreover, part-time faculty typically are not paid for time spent in preparation and they often lack access to important instructional resources before classes start. That means the students taking these classes also lack appropriate access.

A recent report from the grassroots Campaign for the Future of Higher Education poses the question that a student might ask about a class schedule that reflects “just-in-time” hiring: “Who is ‘Professor Staff’ and how can this person teach all these classes?” The question speaks to the adverse effects of last minute and invisible employment on not just faculty but also students. Who is this anonymous person? Without knowing his or her syllabus, how can I make an informed decision to sign up for her class? And how can she teach so many classes and still teach them all to high standards? Common sense tells students this practice makes no sense.

In the “Professor Staff” survey and report, the voices of contingent faculty speak specifically to the learning conditions of students, explaining how last-minute class assignments make it very difficult for students to effectively plan their program of study, to select professors about whom they can gather information and feedback or to talk with those professors about the class. As one respondent said, “Students who want to take additional classes with me in a subsequent semester never know for sure what classes I’ll be assigned, which makes their own scheduling of classes more problematic.” Moreover, given that syllabi can’t be posted ahead of time by unassigned faculty, students are denied the opportunity to adequately prepare for class, and faculty members’ the opportunity to prepare the most up-to-date syllabus. “I have very little time to choose textbooks or write up my syl-
“Aornos 1,” 2003. Pastel, graphite, ash and flour on paper, 30 x 44”.
The artist is Gale Antokal, an associate professor of art at San José State University.
For more, visit www.galeantokal.com.
labi, which can limit the nature of courses in terms of contemporary information or issues…” The same point applies to late/lack of access to key instructional resources (library holdings, sample syllabi, course management systems, software, etc.). “I believe instructors should have plenty of early access to the resources and materials because students will surely need help the first week of classes.”

These problematic learning conditions are common for large numbers of students, particularly in the first year of college—the year in which students are most likely to take courses from contingent faculty and the point at which most students drop out—and they’re also especially common in community colleges, where 70 percent of the faculty are part-time. Making it worse, more so than faculty in any other non-profit higher-education sector, community college professors often teach large numbers of first-generation, lower-income students, and students of color—the very ones who would most benefit from personal connections with faculty. For all students, faculty engagement is important, but such engagement is particularly important for students new to the world of higher education. For instance, one key to success for these students is “institutional agents,” often faculty, who mentor and help students navigate the confusing and foreign territory of higher education. (Deil-Amen, 2011). Leaving large proportions of the faculty invisible and unavailable to students until the last minute serves no good educational purpose.

In sum, just-in-time hiring is not just in time for students, faculty, or for effective education. To continue this employment practice makes no sense and undermines the common good.

Disconnected employment of contingent faculty, in time and place

A second dominant characteristic of contingent employment in academe is “at-will” conditions of employment that disconnect faculty from each other and from their students, in time and place. “At-will,” which means employees work at the “will” of administrators with very limited or no due-process protections, reflects an employment reality for large proportions of contingent faculty, especially non-unionized faculty. The irony is that many contingent faculty are long-term, having taught for years, even decades. Yet, at the whim of an administrator or on the basis of a student complaint, these veteran employees can be non-renewed or downgraded in their assignments with little to no due process.

Again, when considering the needs of students, such conditions of work make

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no sense. If it is important—as we know it is—for faculty to engage and form relationships with students, then we cannot continue to disengage faculty. Consider the need for faculty to advise and mentor students outside of class. Part-time faculty often lack the office space or time to do this important work, and they are paid for in-class teaching only. Indeed, a national survey found that 40 percent of faculty in part-time positions do not advise students outside of class.\textsuperscript{16} Consider as well the important role played by faculty in mentoring students. When class assignment and employment are tenuous over time, it makes it more difficult for those student-faculty relationships to be formed and sustained. Simply put, the structure of at-will employment does not serve students well. The evidence is consistent and strong, and ranges across various student outcomes, ranging from persistence rates to learning outcomes.\textsuperscript{17} Further, this structure also weakens faculty-faculty relations by excluding contingent faculty members from shaping either curriculum or general educational expectations. They may not even be familiar with or to their colleagues, which undermines curricular coordination, coherence, and sequencing.

In sum, at-will employment, paired with limited or no access to due process, are working conditions that structurally disconnect faculty from each other and from their students. Given that we know such connections are particularly significant for the growth demographic of students, this working condition makes no sense, and undermines the common good.

**Curriculum delivery models that generate depersonalized courses**

A third dimension of contingent employment is the prevalence of curricula that are separated and alienated from those faculty. It is common, for instance, for contingent faculty members, particularly those teaching part-time, to be teaching classes developed by other, generally tenure-track faculty members. The course is depersonalized in the sense that it is detached from the particular character and investment of the faculty member who is constructing the educational experience for students.

New high-tech delivery models that physically cleave faculty from students have accelerated this separation, making it difficult for faculty to foster full, personal relationships with the students in their class. More than that, these technologies amplify and extend depersonalization in the search to achieve “economies of scale,” delivering courses to ever larger classes of students. Among the latest ver-
sions are mass produced general education curricula, such as general education classes created and sold by mega-publisher Pearson, as well as massive, open online courses (MOOCs). The ultimate impersonal global mass market is evidenced in MOOCs that are “taught” to tens of thousands of largely anonymous students.

Such curricular models fly in the face of what we know works. We know that personal contact matters to students. Students are not well served by and graduation rates are lower in courses that are delivered in a “virtual assembly line,” with a course being developed by one faculty member (generally full-time), “delivered” by another faculty member (generally part-time), and numerous other professionals, technicians, and staff doing advising, grading, adapting (or designing) and maintaining the curriculum in a high tech environment. Such mass production and unbundling of the faculty role into isolated segments reduces students’ contact with faculty to brief classroom moments. And we know those relationships outside of class matter.

We also know that relevance matters to students. The organization that currently and historically champions liberal education, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), has made relevance the fundamental goal of general education: “AAC&U general education initiatives aim to ensure that every undergraduate student experiences a relevant and challenging general education curriculum.” Toward the goal of effective, quality education, AAC&U has also identified “high impact educational practices.” Among them are learning communities of intensive contact among students and professors, writing intensive experiences, and curriculum that include real world issues in local communities. The conditions of mass-produced, mass-marketed curricula violate each of these practices.

In sum, mass-produced, depersonalized courses, especially ones delivered through technology, detach faculty from students and detach curricula from relevant and engaging community based issues. Such models make no educational sense and serve no common good.

Three Disruptive Innovations for Contingent Faculty

The goal in disrupting these practices is to increase accessibility, connectivity, and applicability for contingent faculty and their students, thus improving educational effectiveness, efficiency, and quality. Given an environment in which policy-makers and managers preach resource scarcity and the need to do more with less,
it should be emphasized that the proposed innovations are low or no cost. Each employs open access technology. Each is a common sense strategy to advance the common good. And each can be undertaken by faculty unions, other faculty groups, contingent faculty, or some combination of them.

**Counter just-in-time employment with virtual visibility**

The invisible dimension of just-in-time employment practices can be countered with online tools that reveal “Professor Staff,” and also make accessible important instructional resources. Where faculty are unionized, some dimensions of these disruptions can be built into contracts, as in due process provisions or in memoranda of agreement that establish a labor/management committee to study an issue.

First consider the low-cost, online survey developed by the New Faculty Majority, which can easily be administered by a bargaining unit or a group of faculty. The survey asks about back-to-school hiring practices, yielding data on the extent to which contingent faculty are hired but a few weeks or days before classes start, have limited or late access to key instructional resources, as well as the faculty members’ sense of the impact this has on their students. Determining the visibility of faculty in contingent positions to students and faculty’s accessibility to important instructional resources can be easily ensured virtually, at little cost. Faculty groups can administer and analyze these surveys.

It would make sense to survey contingent faculty at a campus or within a system. Certain problems of “just-in-time” employment practices can be brought to light. We can—and should—find and publicize the extent to which contingent faculty receive their class assignments (or have them changed) less than two weeks before classes start. We should also know the extent to which contingent faculty can access valuable instructional resources before classes start.

If institutional managers are to properly enable contingent faculty to serve effective, high quality education, they must know the answers to these questions. If contingent faculty are to articulate and negotiate better working and learning conditions, they must also know the answers. And, of course, students also have a right to know whether institutions are employing faculty in ways that optimize their ability to prepare and provide quality education.

But online tools should be used for more than just gathering information. It also makes sense for institutions to use technology to increase the accessibility of
contingent faculty to students, and make more visible the faculty who teach large proportions of classes and students. Use departmental websites to make contingent faculty visible and accessible: Put a face on “Professor Staff.” Such a simple step would make it easier for students to see who is going to be teaching them. It is common sense that this would be better for both students and faculty.

Counter at-will employment practices with actual due process and virtual hiring halls

The lack of continuity and connectivity for contingent faculty due to at-will non-renewals, can be readily countered with some no-cost due process measures and with social media tools—and those measures can be deployed without eliminating managers’ ability to meet changing student demand and preference. Moreover, the current disconnectedness of faculty, particularly of faculty teaching in part-time positions, could be substantially reduced through the creation of virtual hiring halls.

In most higher education settings, renewal decisions regarding contingent faculty, particularly of part-time faculty, are characterized by an extreme degree of managerial discretion. There is extraordinarily little peer involvement or due process. That increases the possibility of capricious and problematic renewal decisions that compromise high academic standards and academic freedom.24

It would make sense to expand peer review and due process measures in the working conditions of contingent faculty. Exemplary language is most prominent in unionized settings and collective bargaining agreements provide some good examples of non-renewal clauses for contingent faculty, though far too few contracts have such provisions.25 An online tool, the NEA’s Higher Education Contract Analysis System (HECAS), which is an easily searchable database available to NEA higher education members, enables faculty leaders to search through hundreds of higher-ed contracts and find model contract language from similar types of institutions in their regions. Good language can range from providing for some level of “instructional continuity” (the institution’s responsibility to find other classes or assignments for displaced faculty) to ensuring a “cancellation payment” for assigned classes that are canceled (or from which faculty are bumped) to the right to grieve non-renewal decisions as “arbitrary and capricious.”26

To further foster continuity and connectivity, it would also make sense to create an online database of contingent faculty members in a general region, a sort of
virtual hiring hall. Technology is being promoted and used to connect students across barriers of space and time. So, too, it could be used to increase the connectivity of contingent faculty through a high tech, virtual equivalent of a union hall. It is one thing, and a good one at that, to have an institutional database of contingent faculty who have taught at the college, as is provided for in Mendocino Lake Community College District’s contract. It is quite another, and a more powerful tool, to have organized regional groups of faculty utilize social media and other online tools to create a virtual hiring hall for matching people to positions. Such a virtual vehicle could connect dispersed faculty to each other and serve as a

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resource for faculty facing non-renewal or reduction of work situations.

In sum, organized faculty can use social media to disrupt the at-will working conditions that structurally disconnect faculty from their peers and students. Faculty can draw on existing examples of contract language to negotiate more peer review and due process surrounding non-renewal of contingent faculty. Institutions should be ensuring a greater measure of transparency and continuity surrounding the employment of contingent and particularly part-time faculty, for students’ benefit. At the same time, faculty should be forming the equivalent of online hiring halls to facilitate instructional continuity and the connectivity of faculty to employers, to each other, and to students. These strategies would benefit not just faculty, but students and the common good.

**Use metro/rural online curricular cooperatives to produce metro-relevant courses.**

The depersonalized nature of popular curricular models that detach contingent faculty from their courses can—and should—be countered with social media tools that reconnect disparate faculty in the collective work of creating new courses. Moreover, the failure of mass marketed curriculum to address local or relevant issues can—and should—be answered by metro cooperatives that create metro- or rural-specific courses. In both cases, technology can leverage strength (more relevant and effective curricula) from weakness (faculty dispersed throughout a region, organized by an umbrella local, by coordinated locals, or by themselves in an “invisible college.”)

Connecting contingent faculty across space and time through social media-like platforms makes sense. To a considerable extent, faculty work has become increasingly unbundled and faculty themselves have become increasingly isolated.
Online curricular communities of faculty teaching particular courses in a particular region can re-integrate them for educational and social benefits.

In the process of this virtual reintegration, it also makes sense to tap into faculty members’ wide-ranging professional and organizational networks so that educators can connect with social services, community groups, and municipal governments. Such efforts can be further facilitated through local campus unions, or umbrella locals, such as Local 500 of SEIU in Washington, D.C. The aim would be to help build the kind of community engaged courses and service learning opportunities that AAC&U has identified as so important to effective, high qual-

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ity education.

A metro, curricular cooperative model (MCC) of creating metro-specific curriculum would accomplish two related and reinforcing objectives. First, it would integrate dispersed faculty into field-specific cooperatives or learning communities that foster sharing of ideas within the locale. They would build on historic models of medieval guilds and workingmen’s associations, both of which were directly connected to and dependent upon local students, and which necessarily spoke to their lives and issues. Second, the MCC model would provide faculty in part-time positions the opportunity to create and own their curricula. After all, faculty are not simply “learners.” Nor are they simply teachers of someone else’s pre-produced, packaged for global mass markets curricula. Professors, tenured and contingent alike, are creators and producers of curricula, and their personal connection to developing and implementing learning experiences are at the core of educational effectiveness and quality. Given that part-time faculty generally have little to no institutional support, colleges and universities would have no claim on the creation of these curricula. Imagine a situation in which, by virtue of these on-line cooperatives, part-time faculty collectively created and owned locally relevant courses. That would, indeed, constitute a truly disruptive innovation.

In sum, organized faculty can employ new online technologies to disrupt the mass production and mass marketing of curricula that are largely irrelevant to local students and communities. Faculty should form metro or rural online curricular cooperatives (MCCs) to create metro or regionally specific courses. In regaining local involvement in and control of the curricula, faculty can embed the relevance and engagement that we know is important for students, that is essential for quality education, and that will benefit the community. That is common sense for the common good.
CONCLUSION

Policy and practice in higher education today are defined and limited by what many have claimed are “new realities” confronting colleges and universities. Three of these are embedded in the just-in-time hiring practices, the at-will conditions of work, and the depersonalized curricular delivery models assigned to contingent faculty, particularly those in part-time positions. These new realities enforce a tyranny of the inevitable that can be difficult to question, challenge, and counter. They are invoked by managers, boards, and policymakers as a natural pattern of progress. Such progress is said to be fostered by “disruptive innovations” that enable higher education to adapt to new realities. Accordingly, opposition is dismissed as resistance to progress, stubborn commitment to business as usual, unrealistic pining for the past, or as blind refusal to recognize the new realities. It is time for faculty to publicly and collectively offer our own disruptive innovations that chart an alternative path more genuinely focused on the common good.

Doing so in part requires us, like the child in the fairy tale, to speak the obvious truth: “Look, he has no clothes.” Far too many pundits, politicians, and institutional managers are too quick to echo the reality of the new normal, unable or unwilling to see and state the obvious.

It is up to professors to stand up collectively and speak truth to the prevailing tyranny of the “new realities.” It is up to organized groups of faculty, especially unionized ones, to point out that these “new realities” are not new. Not only do they perpetuate inequitable access to quality higher education and fail to recognize and serve the fastest growing populations of students in this country, they undermine the American dream by rationing and denying education’s full benefits for hundreds of thousands of students.

But it is not enough for faculty to speak out. Professors must also offer achievable solutions to those problems. This article presents three such solutions: Each is a disruptive innovation for contingent faculty, particularly faculty working in part-time positions; each is low-cost and creatively draws on technology to change adverse aspects of contingent employment; and each enhances the quality of students’ learning conditions and education. Most importantly, each is a common sense step to advancing the common good.

There are, in the words of Carl Rowan’s biography of Thurgood Marshall, politicians who are “dream makers” and those who are “dream breakers.” So it is with higher education policymakers and practitioners. To accept the so-called realities being trumpeted in policy circles and institutional planning processes would be to renege on the promise of American higher education for the rising tide of
demographically diverse students. But it is time now not just to call out the dream breakers. It is time now to imagine and articulate new paths, and to collectively advance and march along those paths to facilitate, expand, and ride the wave of this generation’s dreams.

**END NOTES**

1. While there is understandable sensitivity around the term “adjunct faculty,” I am using it here, as well as in the article’s title, so that the proposed innovative disruptions can find the widest audience possible. According to the Google Keyword Tool, the search term “adjunct faculty” was used about 60,500 per month in spring 2013, compared to just 320 searches per month for “contingent faculty.” This tool can be accessed here: [https://adwords.google.com](https://adwords.google.com).

2. The two-thirds figure does not include graduate employees and postdocs. The New Faculty Majority (www.newfacultymajority.info/equity/) is a national advocacy group for contingent faculty that has adopted a designation that nicely captures the empirical reality of this sector of the faculty workforce—they are now the majority of faculty members nationally.

3. The figures are drawn from the federal government’s data on postsecondary faculty, reported by institutions to the Integrated Postsecondary Data Analysis System (IPEDS) and found in the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) report, The Condition of Education.

4. Community colleges are the point of entry for the largest proportions of students of color, and of lower income and non-traditional students (see NCES reports); they also are the most under-resourced of the postsecondary sectors in terms of spending per student (see Delta Cost Project reports—e.g., Desrochers and Kirshstein, 2012, College spending in a turbulent decade).

5. See Bastedo and Jaquette, “Running in Place: Low-Income Students and the Dynamics of Higher Education Stratification.”

6. The steps proposed in this paper will not remedy the debilitating structural deficits of contingent employment and student debt that also undermine many students’ access to affordable, effective, quality education. Nor will they reverse colleges and universities’ misplaced priorities in proportionately spending ever more on administrative costs and amenities, and ever less on core academic functions, to the detriment of institutions providing affordable, quality education. Both of these financial patterns must be redressed to restructure higher education for the public good. The trend also applies to academic professionals as well as to educational support professionals.

7. Sweet et al., *Who Is Professor ‘Staff’ and How Can This Person Teach So Many Students?*  


13. Gordon et al., “Validating NSSE Against Student Outcomes: Are They Related?”


15. The trend also applies to academic professionals, as well as educational support professionals.


19. Rivard, “Twice as Many MOOCs.”
23. The online survey may be accessed at www.nfmfoundation.org/How_to_use_the_NFM_Foundation_Survey.pdf.
24. See Rhoades, Managed Professionals: Unionized Faculty and Restructuring Academic Labor.
25. Kezar and Sam, “Institutionalizing equitable policies and practices for contingent faculty.”
27. Such a concept may be easier to implement in a dense metropolitan area, but the potential to form virtual hiring halls in rural areas should be explored and not be underestimated.
29. See Berry, Reclaiming the Ivory Tower: Organizing Adjuncts for Change in Higher Education.

WORKS CITED


