

Piecework to Parity: Part-Timers in Action

By Karen Thompson

EDITOR'S NOTE: In 1992, Karen Thompson, a leader of part-time faculty at Rutgers University, wrote that the marginalization of part-time faculty, most of them women, was a money-making proposition for colleges and universities. This marginalization also fragments today's professoriate. Any attempt at increasing faculty power, preserving academic freedom, and strengthening professional control that doesn't recognize the essential role of adjunct faculty in transforming the professoriate is doomed to failure.

When women entered the industrial workforce in this country, they had to accept whatever conditions and positions were offered them just to have work. By the turn of the century, sweatshop labor and meager piecework compensation were often the rule.

Women in academia today seem trapped in a parallel situation. With full-time lines filled substantially by men—70 percent in the humanities, 90 percent of tenured faculty at four-year institutions, 96 percent of tenured faculty at Ivy League colleges—women who want to work in higher education must settle for part-time assignments.¹

These marginal positions most often involve low, by-the-course pay and a workload all too reminiscent of the needletrades of a hundred years ago.

The part-timer scurrying between colleges, piecing together multiple appointments, never achieving the equivalent of a full-time salary, but juggling more than a full workload, has become a familiar image. Administrations justify this picture by pointing to the "need" to contain costs in tough times and to stay flexible in the face of changing enrollment and student demand. Administration officials also note the easy availability of qualified teachers lined up waiting

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for part-time positions. They argue that “market forces,” not management, determine the low pay, lack of protection, and disrespect that go with part-time jobs.

But “supply and demand” actually have little to do with the lowly state of part-time employment, as we observe each year at Rutgers when part-time lecturers who are discouraged all year about future employment become faculty in high demand come September. The fallacy of the “market forces” defense has been exposed with extensive documentation elsewhere in this issue of *Thought & Action* by Margie Burns.²

Economically, the employment of part-timers in academia has become a fundraising engine. Any balancing of the tuition income from a part-timer’s classes against the total of a part-timer’s paycheck shows a consistently large surplus for the institution. At Rutgers, it is actually profitable for departments to give release time to full-time faculty for union activity or to budget release time into grants, since the actual expenditure for replacement with a part-time lecturer is so much lower—three or four times lower. Part-timers who calculate their actual hourly wages based on time spent teaching, preparing, and grading sometimes learn that they are earning less than the minimum wage.

University administrations don’t just profit from the use and abuse of part-time faculty in the name of the “market.” They routinely take advantage of all the economic and flexibility benefits hiring part-timers bring, then blame the victims—part-timers—for lowering academic standards.

Part-timers who piece together three or four jobs to maintain a professional life are seen by administrators as incompetent or unserious academics. A part-time position becomes a stigma on an academic’s vita, although those academics in the part-time category are frequently doing more than the equivalent of full-time work and are often recognized scholars in their fields.

This situation encourages the growing separation between teaching and research at large universities, where it is cost effective to have a small research faculty doing very little teaching, with large numbers of graduate students and part-timers covering most of the undergraduate coursework. This, in turn, makes full-time faculty and part-time faculty sometimes feel at cross purposes, while it definitely shortchanges students.

What makes part-time teaching worth so little? Is it because women do so much of it? Within the diverse categories of people

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teaching part-time in higher education, there are those who would prefer full-time positions. These are most frequently women, women who are overlooked or excluded from full-time job searches. So while the percentage of women teaching part-time in academia increases, as does the percentage of part-time faculty who are women, the percentage of women in tenured and tenure-track positions has been markedly declining.³ This means there are more women in higher education professions than ever, yet their average salaries are going down while their workload goes up.

But not all part-timers are faculty who would rather be teaching full-time. Considerable numbers of part-time faculty teach their courses on top of full-time jobs elsewhere. High school teachers, executives, computer analysts, even tenured faculty at other colleges seek part-time teaching to supplement their incomes or stimulate their lives. These part-timers tend to be men.

Still another category of part-timer exists. These are the assorted writers, musicians, and artists who depend on part-time teaching for their livelihood when performances, poetry, or paintings don't pay the bills. Not surprisingly, these part-timers are more frequently women, women trying to

continue their careers and make ends meet.

Yet within the part-time world, a cruel double standard is alive and well. Burns cites a study by Cubbins and Moore⁴ showing that women's preference for shorter hours results in lower pay, while men's preference for shorter hours has a positive effect on their salaries. Partly as a result, women college graduates in the 1980s were making less on average than men with just high school diplomas.⁵

Ironically, part-time faculty are at once both marginal and essential. Part-timers are underpaid and disrespected, while enriching the curriculum and providing the backbone of basic programs.

This is a contradiction we must seize. The diversity of part-time faculty members can be a weakness that gets turned into a strength. It may be difficult for part-timers to overcome differences and come together to make change for themselves, but when they do, dramatic results are possible. The process of organizing for collective bargaining is crucial to better prospects for part-timers, as the Rutgers experience so clearly demonstrates.

At Rutgers University, the part-time faculty faced all sorts of predictable problems as they began to organize for collective bargaining,

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Communication between part-time faculty was exceedingly difficult, with part-timers scattered across the state, some without mailboxes and others teaching off-campus. Administrators, of course, offered no cooperation on home addresses or telephone numbers.

Part-timers at Rutgers were also divided by the widely varying concerns of each different category of part-timers. Many part-timers, in addition, were too overworked and busy to become involved in the organizing effort. Others feared taking action would jeopardize their insecure positions.

Rutgers administration officials threw up other barriers. The administration evoked a legal precedent requiring part-timers to organize in a chapter separate from the full-timers. This was the first of many “divide and conquer” maneuvers in the administration’s overall strategy to derail bargaining with part-time faculty.⁶ The administration hoped to isolate and nullify the part-time bargaining unit by attempting to portray part-time concerns as separate from and even antithetical to the concerns of the full-timers—as well as to student concerns.

Despite these obstacles, Rutgers part-time faculty were able to build an active committee of part-time faculty organizers. The committee

created a campaign for representation rights that culminated in a four-to-one bargaining election victory.

The part-time faculty were able to unite themselves as a cohesive constituency through a variety of means. Part-timers sent out frequent mailings, including a chapter newsletter. They activated telephone chains and held department and campus meetings. Even the administration’s tactics helped move the organizing momentum along. The administration’s veiled threats of job loss, the administration’s characterization of part-time faculty as undereducated or inexperienced, and the administration’s appeals to false elitism consistently backfired. Part-timers were infuriated by the administration’s condescension and indifference to the vital contribution part-timers make to the educational process. This deep resentment to the administration’s basic lack of respect for part-time work united part-timers throughout the system.

Part-time faculty at Rutgers also built crucial alliances with students, who are generally unaware of the large role played by part-time faculty in undergraduate education. Students at Rutgers were shocked to discover the conditions under which part-time faculty work, and many didn’t even know that some of their most admired teachers were part-timers.

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Part-time faculty did a number of things to narrow the gap between themselves and students. The part-time faculty newsletter ran profiles of distinguished part-time faculty members who vigorously asserted their dedication to students, while noting the substandard terms and conditions of employment that make part-time teaching so difficult. The part-time faculty also held a teach in and discussed the relevant issues in classrooms. Part-timers established ties with the activist student organization—formed to protest soaring tuition increases—and made a financial contribution to the organization, as well as issued public statements of support. Part-time faculty spoke at student rallies—and students came to part-time faculty press conferences. The two groups jointly lobbied the legislature and the university's Board of Governors.

Together with full-time faculty and secretarial and custodial employees, who were all in the midst of negotiating contracts, part-time faculty showed again and again that salary increases did not have to come from tuition hikes. They emphasized how Rutgers spent much more on administrators and buildings than on undergraduate education.

Winning over full-time faculty to the mutuality of part-time inter-

ests proved to be a more challenging task. Unfortunately, many full-timers viewed part-time faculty as underqualified and viewed part-timers as a threat to established tenure track lines. Fortunately, at Rutgers, most full-time faculty who are active and outspoken understand that it is mutually beneficial for part-timers to receive commensurate salaries, benefits, and equitable procedures of notice and reappointment—to stem the erosion of full-time lines.

These alliances with students, full-time faculty, and other university employees proved invaluable during the three long years it took to negotiate the first part-time faculty collective bargaining agreement at Rutgers. Students designed and distributed the part-time faculty posters that spoke to student concerns. Full-time faculty, other university employees, the whole Rutgers community participated in a letter-writing drive to the Board of Governors and a postcard campaign to the acting president.

Support for part-timers came from all quarters, except the administration. The educational mission of the university is the common interest of all student and staff constituencies, and administrations that try to pit these groups against each other, as any controlling force tries to divide and conquer, do so at

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the risk of undermining the quality of education.

During negotiations, the sharpest conflicts revolved around the most crucial issues. When part-timers raised the topic of pro-rata salaries and benefits, the administration cut off discussion. The part-time faculty knew that achieving some sort of parity with full-time faculty—compensation calculated on a fraction of a full-time salary—would both improve the part-time situation and protect full-time lines by making costs more equivalent.

The part-time faculty also saw that benefits could be effectively pro-rated, based on a percentage, and tied to longevity or course load. These changes, in turn, would have a tremendous impact on a part-time teacher's ability to perform well and improve the quality of education. These issues are akin to a whole slew of "comparable worth" issues for women in the larger workforce, where women are consistently paid less for equivalent work.

But the administration was not interested in these issues. At one point, the administration even acknowledged to the part-time faculty that the part-timer proposals might make for better management practices and would no doubt have favorable effects on education as well as teacher morale. Yet the

administration made clear that it would, in no way, consider any form of parity with full-time faculty.

The administration would not accept pro-rata pay rather than piecework because piecework goes to the heart of how the university saw the part-timers' relationship to the institution. Almost anything that even suggested a more permanent or respectable connection to the university was contemptuously opposed.

For the Rutgers administration, maintaining an itinerant, insecure reserve force of teachers was the highest priority. Administrators were determined to keep part-timers in a peripheral position, and disdain became a major administration weapon. One part-time faculty's reasoned proposal for benefits was met by a curt comment from the administration's negotiator: "I'm not going to be lectured at by the likes of you."

Part-time faculty looked past the ridicule and continued to stick to the long-term agenda—by focusing on issues of equity and turning piecework into parity. In the agreement finally hammered out, the part-time faculty did manage to negotiate per credit minimums that resulted in substantial increases for some and an across-the-board increase for those already at or above the minimum. Also negotiated were compensation for oversize classes and percentage increases

for all part-timers in subsequent years of the contract.

The administration located funds for these increases as long as part-time faculty didn't make dramatic changes in status or the structure of part-time positions. The respect issue—a sore spot for part-time folks—was addressed at no economic cost to Rutgers by dropping the “visiting” from the previous title of “visiting part-time lecturers.” This meant quite a bit to those part-timers who had been visiting for 10 or 20 years.

Part-time faculty were also able to win a grievance procedure and some notice of reappointment, but the measures themselves fell short of what was needed for real protection and due process. Through the bargaining process, however, part-time faculty did learn what the central issues

are, where to begin the next round, and, certainly, which negotiating approaches might be most useful.

The first contract is a first step for part-time faculty at Rutgers, as well as a first step for part-time faculty elsewhere in higher education. If equity in employment and excellence in education are to be more than smooth phrases, then part-time faculty must be willing to step forward, join with other members of the university community, and show that the marginal is actually essential.

Part-time faculty must not settle on a pittance for piecework, but must pursue full compensation and respect for the valuable contribution part-time faculty make to the educational process. At Rutgers, part-timers learned, above all, to send their own message to the new president, the legislature, and the whole community. ■

AUTHOR'S POSTSCRIPT

What is most striking, and sad, rereading this article, almost ten years after it was first written, is how much of it still applies today. Both at Rutgers and across the nation, part-time faculty are still overlooked and underpaid. They still fear speaking out on these issues, because they remain vulnerable to reappointment by whim. Part-timers are today an even larger percentage of the academic workforce, with women disproportionately represented. Pro-rata compensation and benefits continue to be elusive goals for part-time faculty.

At Rutgers, we have successfully negotiated two more collective bargaining agreements since that first extremely difficult one, and pro-rata compensation is no longer unmentionable at our bargaining table, but it remains a distant target. Examples of successful part-time organizing do occur—Boston, Chicago, Washington State, California—but much more needs to be done by full-time faculty, professional associations, students, parents, and alumni, as well as by part-timers themselves.

Some new data should be emerging this fall, from surveys conducted by the disciplinary associations, that should prove useful to many of these constituencies. Early in 2001—January 12–14—a national conference on contingent academic labor will take place in San Jose. Plans are also in the works for a National Equity Week modeled on the successful Action 2000 efforts that last spring gathered 40,000 petition signatures from 86 community college campuses in California. We're moving ahead slowly, but we are moving ahead.

Notes

- ¹ According to an 1988 study by the U.S. Department of Education, 70 percent of part-timers in the Humanities are women.
- ² See another article with a similar message by Margie Burns, published in two issues of *Forum*.
- ³ This point is aptly argued in Turner Lomperis' article in a winter issue of *The Journal of Higher Education*.
- ⁴ See Burns, *Forum*, Vol. 3, No. 1, p. 4.
- ⁵ See Faludi, 1991.
- ⁶ Paul Lauter artfully explains the class context and function of these tactics in a chapter of his book, "A scandalous misuse of faculty—adjuncts," pp. 198-208.

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AUTHOR'S IDENTIFICATION NOTE

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