

Academic Apartheid: The Predicament Of Part-time Faculty

By Donald N. S. Unger

EDITOR'S NOTE: Institutions of higher learning, Donald Unger notes in this article from spring 1995, are first and foremost transmitters of value. So what values are put forth, he asks, when colleges and universities claim teaching matters, yet less than half of today's college professors are tenured? Putting an end to the unethical exploitation of part-time faculty members demands a moral awakening. In the following pages, Unger lays out a still-convincing case that the fate of the professoriate and the academy are tied up with facing this moral challenge.

I know I am about to be offered a job when interviewers begin to apologize. They examine their shoes or a far wall, purse their lips, shake their heads in embarrassment.

"As you probably know," they often tell me, in a pained, obligatory preamble, "salaries for adjunct faculty are abysmally low."

Yes. I know.

And I nod a gesture of understanding, if not approval. I need the work; what else can I say? Increasingly, though, I feel the urge to turn the question around. Why I put up with the situation is obvious. But the people doing the interviewing—the tenured members of search committees, the departmental and

divisional chairs, the deans—how can *they* put up with the growing disparity between full and part-time faculty? The market based excuses that the two-tier system is firmly entrenched and each college has ample company—do not respond to the larger, moral issue. And it is in this arena that people should and, I believe eventually will, be held accountable.

Cost matters, of course, and a certain amount of market discipline is reasonable and necessary. But academia is not a business; colleges and universities do not advertise themselves as the lowest bidder. Institutions of higher education are first and foremost transmitters of

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values. Paramount among these values is the ideal that learning is a precious thing, that it matters above whatever its immediate and obvious utility may be. We inculcate values less through words than through deeds; *tell* your child to be honest, then let her watch you cheat on your tax returns, and see which cue she follows. Similarly, *saying* that teaching matters, while less than half of today's college professors are either tenured or tenure-track, is, quite simply, to lie.

I have almost always worked the equivalent of a full-time schedule since completing graduate school, five years ago. But my pay has never approached full-time pay, nor has it yet equalled the compensation that I received as a graduate teaching assistant. Adjunct instructors typically earn between one and two thousand dollars per three-credit course. An eight course load—more than most tenured faculty members teach—brings an annual salary of \$12,000 before taxes, assuming course compensation at the median rate. That's take-home pay below the federal poverty level, less than what a grocery bagger makes, low enough to qualify for food stamps. For many adjunct faculty members a lack of benefits—particularly medical insurance—is an even more serious problem than compensation. Some institutions allow part-time faculty

and staff to “buy in” to a medical plan; most don't. Even when this option is theoretically available, insurance costs of up to one thousand dollars per month could eat all of an adjunct's salary.

The ideal relationship between adjunct pay and tenure-track pay is open to debate. A minority of adjunct faculty are not in search of meaningful income. They are professionals of whatever stripe looking to supplement their experience, semi-retired people, spouses looking to stay active by teaching rather than studying, recent graduates biding their time until permanent work comes along. But the vast majority are very much in search of full-time work.

Many professional organizations set guidelines for the equitable employment and professional treatment of adjunct faculty. But these guidelines include no mechanism for sanctioning offenders—now the overwhelming majority of colleges and universities.

The money is there. Administrative salaries, and related expenditures, have doubled over the past generation a period of explosive growth in the use of adjuncts. Administration is now the largest item—over 50 percent—in institutional budgets. Presidents routinely command six figure salaries, while adjuncts are hard pressed to

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break into the low five figures. Add to this: suites of offices, secretaries, office equipment, work study students, and benefits such as presidential mansions. American industry has also cut costs by shifting more work to part-time workers—in the name of efficiency and healthy austerity—while executives continue to drain the corporate coffers at an alarming rate. A Japanese or German CEO typically earns ten times the wage of the average worker; an American CEO earns one hundred times the wage of the average worker.

The marginalization of adjunct faculty, both economic and professional, is our problem. Many professional organizations and tenured faculty members have either been unable or unwilling to fight this trend. Perhaps taking a position on the treatment of less powerful colleagues appears inimicable to the aura of professionalism that some colleagues prefer to cultivate. But tenured faculty members—already a minority—have the most to lose. The cheap pools of adjunct faculty labor facilitate the current assault on tenure. Tenure gives faculty members the protection and the freedom to speak out, particularly where the good of the institution is concerned. The consequences of failing to speak out should be increasingly clear to all.

What is to be done? We need:

- An institutional cap on the percentage of courses taught by adjuncts. Adjuncts teach almost half the courses at some colleges; this proportion should be drastically reduced.
- A relationship between adjunct pay and full-time pay that is closer to 75 percent, rather than 20 to 25 percent, with allowances made for committee service, attendance at meetings, and other outside the classroom activities.
- Time limits on the employment of adjuncts teaching full loads; such positions should be converted to tenure-line positions.

I am unmoved by people who apologize to me for the situation that they are helping to perpetuate. When colleagues and administrators, either publicly or privately, acknowledge the fundamental injustice of the two-tier system, I am loathe to grant them absolution. Quite the contrary: admitting the truth and failing to act is worse than living in denial.

Academic apartheid will only end through long and traumatic struggle. That adjuncts themselves will begin to fight for their rights is predictable, and already in motion. Just as important, however, is the moral reawakening of tenured faculty.

We are your brothers and sisters. To the degree that this problem

is generational, we are your children. We are suffering a slow and painful professional death. If you believe in education, if you believe in justice, it is essential that you stand up and say, "I will not participate in this process. I will not teach in a department which exploits my colleagues. I will not stand by and watch administrative budgets

swallow up the marrow and blood of this institution."

This is not merely necessary and right, nor just a hand down to a group of people less fortunate. The conditions under which adjuncts work can only improve: it is the fate of both the academy and the professoriate which now hangs in the balance. Examine your conscience. ■

AUTHOR'S POSTSCRIPT

I was angry when I wrote this piece. After teaching as an adjunct for several years, it had become clear to me that the work was professionally, economically, and emotionally unsustainable, that I would not be able to continue working under these conditions. The word "terminal" as applied to the Master of Fine Arts degree I held, was beginning to take on ominous connotations.

As a graduate assistant, I had been represented by a union. After leaving school and teaching as an adjunct, I'd never been able to earn even half my GA stipend. At this writing, I am completing a Ph.D. and once again a union member—this time at the University of Massachusetts—and I am making more than three times what I made as an adjunct, even before factoring in benefits and tuition.

While I expect to finish and defend my dissertation during this 2000/2001 academic year, as I approach the job market again in search of a tenure-track position, I know I may shortly be confronted by my own words. Of course, I still believe that it is the moral and professional obligation of full-time faculty to stand up against the personal and institutional degradation inherent in the exploitation of part-time faculty.

I was not naive five years ago; I am not naive now. I never believed that our professional difficulties would simply evaporate if enough people shouted "Stop!" Nor have I ever been unmindful of the costs that attend what can only be called labor struggles. While I cannot yet answer the question of what I will do in the future, my experience in recent years has only strengthened my conviction that unionism is at the heart of the long-term solution to the exploitation of part-time faculty.