

Priorities and Power: Adjuncts in the Academy

By Jeannie Ludlow

Monday, January 8. I am contracted to teach one class at a small liberal arts college 30 miles north of my home, for \$1,296 per semester. My monthly bills are: rent, \$225; car payment, \$50; utilities, \$100; and student loan payment, \$496.

In order to get that student loan payment deferred, I need to be registered with the local unemployment office. In order to register with unemployment, I need a letter from the department chair at my primary institution stating that I am “unemployed” because of “lack of work.”

I know the department chair has this letter on disk because I have needed it before. I call and tell him what I need. Of course, he says, he'll be happy to write me this letter. But he'd like to wait a few days. Would that be all right? I am awfully broke after the holidays and my next little paycheck is six weeks away, but I say sure.

He's hoping he won't have to

write it at all. He's talking with the dean about getting a course for me. He'll let me know by Thursday.

I hang up the phone conflicted, anticipating teaching, anticipating dejection. But mostly I feel tired. If he calls me on Thursday with a course, I will have the weekend plus Monday to prepare, as classes begin the next Tuesday. And I can do no preparation before Thursday because he didn't say what kind of class it might be.

I hate waiting. I hate preparing for classes in so little time. Of course I can do it; the best adjuncts are able to construct classes out of what my grandma calls “a lick and a promise.”

I have, for this same department chair, prepared for a four-course semester load in two and one-half weeks—using books I've never seen in two of the classes and placing last minute book orders for the other two classes. That meant also planning at least two weeks of no-text teaching while waiting for

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those late orders to be filled and hearing the usual dry, slightly recriminatory “you know, book orders were due months ago” from the bookstore requisitioner. I can do it again.

It is Thursday night, and I have heard nothing from the department chair. I fume to a friend on the phone: If he calls tomorrow I’m just going to say no, I won’t take a class this late. I need more time.

But we know I will take the class, if he calls. There are at least six other people in town who could teach for the department—several of whom are from my Ph.D. program, many of whom are my friends, most of whom are working in coffee shops and used book stores, if they are working at all.

If I won’t teach that class, one of them will. And then, when summer courses are assigned, why should the department chair call me—the one who said no—before he calls the one who taught the class in January?

But the call never comes, and, on Tuesday morning, the first day of classes, the chair is printing the three-sentence letter for me when I reach his office. He’s sorry. He was on the phone with the dean this morning still trying to get that class for me. I know that he was also trying to get that class for the department and for the students. I know that he is not the bad guy in

my drama of underemployment. I smile tightly, nod, and tell him thanks, that I appreciate his efforts. And I feel like those other six people are smiling tightly and nodding right along with me.

As I turn to leave, he says that I should go right ahead and use my office space, and do any job application-related copying and mailing from the department. And I know that he does not have to say that. I don’t expect it. Other departments wouldn’t—and don’t—do that much for their adjuncts. Thanks, I say again. This time, I really mean it.

I am an adjunct¹ faculty person, also known as an academic gypsy, a highway flier, a “roads” scholar, an academic migrant worker, a homeless intellectual, and (a bit more optimistically) a teaching specialist. My place within the U.S. educational apparatus² is, I believe, a liminal one.

We who teach courses on demand with little preparation time and even less support, who quilt together a kind of academic career—sometimes part-time, sometimes, if we are lucky, full-time, almost always outside the institutionalized protections of tenure and representation in faculty senates—make up (as of 1997) more than 45 percent of the faculty in U.S. higher education. This fig-

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ure is up from 34 percent in 1980 and 22 percent in 1970.³

Recently, the literature on academe has seen an upsurge in examinations of our status, our relationship to academia. These examinations have come primarily from professionals who rue our difficult situations and our marginalization—and who sometimes offer cogent analyses of what needs to be done—and from journalists writing for an academic audience, who seem to find in our stories a sensationalism that is usually reserved for more mainstream newspapers.

These publications are welcome. Anything that draws attention to and attempts analysis of our situations is crucial to an understanding of not only adjuncting but also the status of all teachers in the educational apparatus. In addition to these established voices, the stories of adjuncts are finally being told in our own voices. Special sessions on the employment “crisis in the academy” at national and regional conferences, special issues and sections of issues of academic journals devoted to analysis of labor in the academy, and collections edited by the aforementioned professionals often include our versions of our tales.

This paper is my contribution to the conversation about adjunct status and the crisis in the academy,

although the crisis I’m seeing is not exclusively, or even necessarily, economic. My analysis is intended to add another layer of potential understanding to a complex situation that requires even more analysis and action than has been accorded it.

The proportion of part-time⁴ faculty nearly doubled from 1970 to 1991 to its present rate of nearly 45 percent. In the 1990s, only one-third of all faculty hired have been full-time, tenure-track faculty.⁵

When I consider that the majority of courses taught by “non-regular” faculty (that is, adjunct, visiting, and graduate student teachers) are “service courses,” lower-division and introductory level courses that fulfill college and university requirements and department and program prerequisites, and that these courses often have larger enrollment numbers per section than the courses reserved for tenure-track professors, it becomes clear that the role of these “non-regular” faculty is crucial to the economic state of an institution.

In Alison Schneider’s *Chronicle of Higher Education* article examining the ways these numbers play out in English Departments, Cary Nelson explains how tenured faculty members’ ability to teach smaller

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sections of more specialized upper division courses is dependent on the university's profit margin earned in a non-regular staffed writing course. In other words, the money "saved" by having graduate students and adjunct faculty members teach composition and large sections of introductory courses provides the profit margin needed to support a 15-student senior seminar on Milton, queer theory and contemporary literature, or language poets.

Nelson estimates that, in 1998, this profit margin is about \$8,000 per composition course (taught by graduate assistants) at his own University of Illinois, and approximately \$15,000 per course (taught by part-timers) at the University of Cincinnati.⁶ At Bowling Green State University, with Ph.D. in hand and five-and-one-half years of post-Ph.D. teaching experience, I earn the same part-time rate per credit hour as my friends who have earned M.A.s.

Recently, I was discussing with a department chair the possibility of teaching a course I had taught before. In the process of explaining why I felt reticent, I mentioned the size of the section. The current course would be no more than 40 students, she said. I was confused; the earlier course had nearly 90 students in it. Yes, she remarked,

but you got paid for a double section, right? Wrong.

In the process of untangling the information from the assumptions, I learned that maximum section size is often larger for part-timers who are paid by the section than for full-time and tenure-track teachers, paid by the year—although it is my understanding that this discrepancy is disappearing in the much-publicized economic struggles of state-supported institutions.

For that earlier course, I was paid \$579 per credit hour, totaling \$1,737 for the section. At 90 students, that came out to \$19.30 per student. The university paid me less than \$20 per student to teach a 90-student section of a course that satisfies general education requirements for most of our colleges. It was a course for which I had no educational training—which meant hours of additional preparation and a constant nagging feeling of cheating the students. I had no grading assistance and no health insurance for myself or my son. As Claire F. Roof, a part-time composition instructor, says in the Schneider article, "We're a cheap date."

I do see irony in the fact that, as higher education increasingly becomes a "tool of the job market,"⁷ aimed at producing workers for multinational corporations rather than well-rounded educated individuals, more of us working in

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higher education are unable to find job security and respect in our own field of employment. Katherine Kolb locates our lack of success not in the difference between the numbers of Ph.D.s and the numbers of jobs but in administrative decisions not to hire us as full-time, tenure-track faculty. She writes, "The sheer number of adjuncts says plainly enough that there is still plenty of teaching to be done."⁸

Nelson corroborates, explaining that one valid argument for the perpetuation of the job crisis in the academy is not that there are too many new Ph.D.s being produced but that "what the country lacks is the will to pay their salaries."⁹

He emphasizes that there are forces—people—within the academic apparatus who are making decisions about how much money can be spent on salaries: "Institutional claims about poverty are really claims about priorities and about power."¹⁰

This perspective reminds me of the importance of seeing the many elements of any apparatus working together systemically, often, as Foucault explains, "as a means of justifying or masking a practice which itself remains silent."¹¹

It occurs to me that tenure, like funding priorities, is one more element of the educational apparatus

that often covers over its own "silent" practices. That is to say, the tenure system must be understood to be working simultaneously with administrative bodies, Boards of Regents, corporate foundations, and other elements of the academic apparatus to shape the present, imbalanced system of ranking—and valuing—teachers.

I look at the current market-focus of undergraduate education and wonder what would happen if tenure decisions were made on the basis of one's ability to function within that market-driven educational system. Would tenure be offered to those of us whose skills include construction of classes at the last minute? Those who can teach enormous numbers of students with little or no grading or technical support? Those able to work for multiple departments at the same time?

Would tenure be denied to people who are so highly specialized that they can only teach in one subject area during their career? How would the market-driven educational apparatus change graduate education? Would Ph.D. programs trade graduate student teachers so that "apprentice" professors could gain a breadth of teaching experience? Would all graduate courses be interdisciplinary?

Although the temptation to fantasize about what could have

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been—or could be—done to change my current situation is strong, I no longer tell myself the “if-only” stories that plague many adjuncts: If only I had attended a different Ph.D. program; if only I had a book contract; if only teaching were valued more highly by administrators and hiring committees; if only I had more time to write for publication.

I know now that the probability of my getting a tenure-track position was slim to begin with. Recent scholarship by Cary Nelson, Stanley Aronowitz, Gary Rhoades and Sheila Slaughter, and Randy Martin traces the “current” academic job crisis to its actual advent in 1970.¹² As Nelson explains, in spite of a few years’ reprieve in the late 1970s, “less than half of new Ph.D.s have found tenure-track jobs in most of the last 25 years”¹³ and “it is likely that no more than 25 percent of the English Ph.D.s produced in the 1990s will end up becoming tenured faculty members.”¹⁴

Of course, some people self-select out of the academic apparatus and some never expect to become tenured faculty members. Still, the numbers are sufficient to counter meritocratic thinking and the self-blame that often attends it. In his *Manifesto of a Tenured Radical*, Nelson works through each one of those debilitating if-only stories, deconstructing it and showing its lack of relationship to facts. He

effectively argues that getting a tenure-track job within the academic apparatus today is a crapshoot.¹⁵

In 1996, after four years of piecing together a living out of part-time work, unemployment, and an occasional semester of full-time teaching, I was offered a one-year full-time position in a department for which I had often taught. Ironically, my partner had recently finished a degree and landed a full-time nonacademic job in our city. That job included a comprehensive benefits package that covered my son and me, as well as a good salary.

We’d just had a conversation about how I could work toward better academic employability through publication now that I no longer had to teach just to survive. We had gone through our budget and figured that a part-time salary would suffice, as long as I were able to teach two classes each term.¹⁶

Because I was still telling myself if-only stories (if only I had more publications, I could get a “real” job), I had chosen to prioritize publishing. Then I got the offer. The chair asked if I might be interested in a possible full-time position for the next year if one became available. Because this particular chair is someone I’ve worked with for many years and with whom I

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am very comfortable, I explained to him about my partner's new job and my newly defined priorities.

He knew how difficult it had been for me to find time to research while teaching three to five courses each term on a part-time basis. He supported my hope that I might still be "employable" in a tenure-track position, and he said he would support me whether or not I decided to consider his offer. Since the funding had not yet come through, he urged me to think about it; he would call me when the funding decisions were made.

Not long after that, I found posted on an E-mail discussion list a question about working part-time. The questioner had just finished her Ph.D. and had not been successful on the job market. Should she teach part-time or should she take a nonteaching job? She had heard that part-timers were "damaged goods" according to search committees.

I immediately began questioning my prioritization of publication over a full-time position. What should I do? I had no idea what a hiring committee might make of my years of part-time work. Would they see it as an indication that I was not tenurable in the long run? Or would they see it for what it was: one woman's incredibly hard work done so that she might stay in her chosen profession? I posted to

the list that I too wanted to know what people thought.

I received a full range of replies: I should take the full-time to show that I was employable. I should take the part-time in order to publish. I should get out of academic work now because it was never going to get any better. I should have been publishing all along because only those who love to write, who need to write so much that nothing would stop them, are going to make it in this depressed job market.

My reactions to these responses ran the emotional gamut, but the one message that really drew me up short was to the point: "Stop whining and get organized!"

Many of the recent studies of the academic employment crisis advocate unionization as the best hope for us all—faculty, nonteaching employees, adjuncts and graduate students.¹⁷ I am in absolute agreement with arguments that academic employees should unionize, and I believe that many of the concerns related to the plight of adjuncts could be pragmatically and effectively addressed by collective bargaining, but I am not going to delineate the arguments for unionization here.

I do think it's important to note that the energy and time that must be spent on organizing would often

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serve to reinforce adjuncts' marginalization. The demands of organizing—especially if it were accomplished without the support of regular faculty, staff, and students—would cut dramatically into the time we already spend on teaching, traveling between jobs, doing research (if we can), and trying to maintain our familial and social support systems.

While I do not intend to make an argument against organizing, I want to emphasize that while, as Nelson says, we adjuncts “have nothing to lose” (in working for unionization) we also, pragmatically, often feel that we have little left to spend on the effort. The support of other university employees is going to be crucial to our progress toward effective collective bargaining.

But this paper is not about the importance of unionizing. This paper's focus is on the identity politics of adjuncting and how these identity politics inform how we experience our work and how others, especially administrators and regular faculty, may experience us.

I believe that, until our identity issues are addressed within the academic apparatus, collective bargaining will be inconsistently, and often only temporarily, successful.

Adjuncts have long been elements of the higher educational

apparatus. But it is only in the past few years that our existence has become a site on which the struggles of that apparatus have been played out. As thwarted scholars working at what many fear is the temporal end of the tenure system, we have watched administrative bodies grow larger (and better paid) while faculty bodies have shrunk, due to retirement, scant cost-of-living increases and decreased morale.

It is our positionality, caught between the shrinking tenure system and administrative glut, between the fundamental love of knowledge that sent us to graduate school and the academy's move to a market-driven educational system, that defines us as liminal. And our liminality, I believe, provides clues to the reasons for our situations as well as to the actions that will, when combined with effective collective bargaining, change those situations.

Many of the current force of adjuncts, as graduate students of the 1990s, represent—or perhaps embody—the canonical and philosophical changes in higher education that have attended the “opening” of the academy to members of previously excluded groups, such as people of colors, women, members of the working classes, and others.

Brought up in the post-Sputnik drive for public education, aided in

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our educational goals by military and other government financial programs, by affirmative action, and by feminist interventions in higher education, the graduate students of the 1990s—a diverse group, to be sure—have grown up within the intellectual context of cultural studies—the academic offspring of 1930s Marxism and 1960s social justice movements in Europe and the U.S..

We have benefited from the social and intellectual developments of feminism, multiculturalism, international studies, and queer theory. We have also benefited from intellectual challenges to traditional disciplinary and a belief in one Truth. Attention to class, gender, and ethnicity issues and calls for self-criticism among representatives of the academic apparatus have also helped define this generation of grad students.

Most of us attained our degrees under a rubric of interrogating power and privilege. Many of us came to graduate school via paths that were not available to our immediate forebears.

While I have seen no study of adjuncts that provides information regarding our socioeconomic classes of origin, I know, for one thing, that women are better represented among the ranks of part-timers

than of full-timers. In her essay “Alchemy in the Academy: Moving Part-Time Faculty from Piecework to Parity,” Karen Thompson reports that, as of 1993, women held 51 percent of part-time academic jobs but only 34 percent of full-time academic jobs.¹⁸

Even allowing for the incidence of women who choose to work part-time in order to prioritize family activities, this disparity is striking. In addition, my reading and personal experience have taught me that many adjuncts feel trapped in our situations by a combination of large student loan debts, a sense that there are few other employment options available to us, and a lack of a sense of entitlement.

None of these elements taken individually indicates a particular class background but, when considered together with my own experiences as a working class woman who made it through graduate school and with the personal stories I have heard and read, the combination does suggest that those of us who came to graduate schools from the lower-to-middle classes, and who took seriously the lessons about power and privilege that we learned there, might indeed comprise a ready force of reserve employees for the academic apparatus.

And, although those of us who came from the working class may

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have left behind many of the markers of working-class life, especially in terms of economic conditions, we have not lost the class- and gender-based consciousness that informs our understanding of our “place” within the academic apparatus.

In fact, many of us find that our gender and class consciousness are enhanced by our experiences in the academy. This consciousness may well provide the right combination of political awareness and lack of a sense of entitlement to make us leaders in the struggle to end those abuses.

I don't claim that adjuncts, as a class of academic workers, are a homogenous group of relatively new Ph.D.s.¹⁹ But I do think that, as the need arose for the higher educational apparatus to respond to a call for a more flexible, more affordable work force, class and gender biases within the apparatus played a crucial role in the directions those responses took.

Cary Nelson makes explicit the relationship between class bias and the struggles to overcome the employment crisis within the academic apparatus. He notes that one “nasty solution” to the overabundance of Ph.D.s might be:

to give up mass higher education for the poor and the middle classes and make it instead an

option only for children of wealthy parents. Some conservatives find that alternative attractive; it would return higher education to the race and class it originally served.²⁰

It would also return higher education to a time when cultural studies, multiculturalism, and empowerment of students had not sullied intellectual integrity. Nelson reminds me that cultural studies, as a multidisciplinary academic field, has sought to overcome the separation between academic and political life, between field of study and people's lived experiences.

The British tradition of cultural studies, particularly, has been involved in class and ethnicity struggles both within and outside of the academy. The American academic apparatus, however, has been less able to move cultural studies' intellectual analyses of ethnicity, class, gender and sexuality—its foci of study—into activist struggles outside the academy, much less into its own workplace in any kind of organized, collective manner.

While I believe that collective bargaining is necessary to overcome the “adjunct problem” in the U.S., I believe that organizing will not help without an attendant change in the academic apparatus.

As we have worked to teach our

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students that they must learn to live in a diverse and changing global community, we have failed to integrate the practical ramifications of these lessons into the academic work experience.

We teach our students that there are multiple knowledges, that power is culturally operative, that truth and history are culturally constructed, that people must work for their own empowerment, but we faculty continue to rue our students' lack of historicity and their waning interest in knowledge for knowledge's sake, while ignoring their unique strengths and successes.

We teach our students that an individual's identity structures that individual's responses to disempowerment. We teach them that we should all be working toward the dismantling of privilege. But we do not acknowledge the crucial role the lack of a feeling of "entitlement" plays among adjuncts, and we do not challenge the sheer numbers of administrators—or their extravagant salaries—on our own campuses. In sum, we have been unable to imagine and work collectively toward needed changes in our own employment communities.

Yes, organization is crucial to our situation, but acknowledgment of the foundational and structural changes in the academic apparatus

that have perpetrated and perpetuated our situation is at least as necessary.

Too often, our senior colleagues seem to believe that the corporatization²¹ of higher education in the U.S. is the source of "the problem" and that, when that corporatization is stopped, things will go back to the way they were. They envision that we will return to some idealized state in which faculty members were valued for their knowledge bases, taught their specialty courses, mentored graduate student apprentices, and earned tenure.

This misplaced nostalgia for "the way things were" seems to come from an uncritical memory of the academy. When were jobs not scarce? Was it when a university education was the entitlement of a privileged few and graduate school was even more exclusive? Is that really what we want to return to?

If we are to effect real change, we must all challenge the maintenance of the silences within the academic apparatus that cover over the decisions being made about our lives. Adjuncts must work toward organization even when we are exhausted and defeated. But we must also make clear—loud and clear—to our communities what our working conditions are.

When I attend a meeting of any kind, I make it a point to speak up,

and I make it a point to begin my comment with, "As an adjunct instructor, I ..." When I tell someone why I cannot contribute to that cause or this anthology, I make it a point to mention how many classes I am currently teaching. When I speak at a conference while working part-time, I ask the program editors to list all my current institutions, not just my primary one. I tell my students that I'm not tenured and not eligible to be tenured at my current university, and I tell them why.

It would be easy to label these utterances "whining." But I have decided to make these points with a tone of slight indignance or great humor, rather than the ubiquitous "tired" tone that so many adjuncts find ourselves adopting. But even at the risk of "whining," we must make visible and audible our experiences.

In addition, tenured and

tenure-track faculty must recognize in my story reverberations of the threats to your work in the academy. You must speak out just a bit more than you dare against administrative inflation and faculty starvation. You must continue to work toward your own organization and to challenge those who instruct you to act immorally on their behalf: hiring part-timers on a per-section basis rather than making a one-year appointment, for instance.

You must challenge your colleagues and administrators to act on what you have learned about privilege and power. You must recognize and support the unionization efforts of your adjunct co-workers and your graduate students. It is on the strength of your support, on your denouncement of administrative privilege—and sometimes of your own privilege—that we will all succeed.²² ■

Endnotes

¹ In this article, I am using the term "adjunct faculty" to refer to any teaching position that does not carry with it job security or a potential for job security: part-timers, temporary full-timers, instructors, and limited-term lecturers are all included under this admittedly clumsy label. I know that the term "adjunct" may well have very different connotations for different readers because the administrative labels used to describe our positions vary greatly from one institution to another. Still, I have chosen to err on the side of consistency rather than to provide a series of descriptives in this paper.

² I use "apparatus," here, in its Foucauldian sense: in "The Confession of the Flesh," Foucault delineates three simultaneous connotations of the

term. First, he explains that "apparatus" indicates a system of connected relations around a particular institution, including discourse; laws and regulations; administrative measures; philosophical, scientific and artistic expressions; and financial activities. Second, he explains that an apparatus continually reinscribes those connections in ways that may cover or normalize the practices of the institution. Third, he says that the apparatus is historically situated, that it responds to some "urgent need" and then serves to reinforce the dominant ideology. One implicit purpose of this paper is to reveal the postsecondary educational system in the U.S. as a functioning apparatus in all that word's connotations. See Foucault, 1980, 194-228.

³ Nelson, *Manifesto*, 1997, 163. Nelson's statistics are for part-timers, which

- comprise the largest population of adjuncts at any given time, hence the qualifier "more than."
- ⁴ Please note that "part-time" and "adjunct" are not used interchangeably in this paper. "Part-time" faculty comprise a subset of "adjunct" faculty. The term "non-regular" is intended to cover an even larger group of teachers: any teacher not on the tenure line at a tenure-granting college or university is considered "non-regular."
- ⁵ Rhoades and Slaughter, 1997, 20.
- ⁶ Schneider, 1998.
- ⁷ Martin, 1997, 2.
- ⁸ Kolb, 1997, 37.
- ⁹ Nelson, *Manifesto*, 1997, 178.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 162.
- ¹¹ Foucault, 1980, 194-95.
- ¹² See Nelson, *Manifesto*, 1997; Aronowitz, 1997; and the special issue of *Social Text* dedicated to academic labor issues, edited by Randy Martin.
- ¹³ Nelson, *Manifesto*, 1997, 167-68.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 153-170.
- ¹⁶ I am well aware of the relative privilege I enjoyed in being able to make this decision. For years, as a single mom, I had no other income source to fall back on, no life insurance, no health insurance for my son or myself. This change in my economic status put me in a financial and emotional position that many adjuncts never enjoy.
- ¹⁷ See Nelson, *Will Teach for Food*, 1997; and the special issue of *Social Text* dedicated to academic labor issues, edited by Randy Martin.
- ¹⁸ Thompson, 1997, 278.
- ¹⁹ The 1998 *Chronicle of Higher Education* Almanac includes a table which suggests that there is little variation between full-time and part-time faculty status when measured according to racial/ethnic group. According to this table, "Employees in Colleges and Universities by Racial and Ethnic Group, Fall 1995," approximately 85 percent of full-time faculty are white while 83 percent of part-time faculty are white. I have not seen a breakdown of faculty employees according to their socio-economic class of origin.
- ²⁰ Nelson, *Manifesto*, 1997, 174.
- ²¹ By "corporization," I mean the treatment of higher education as a business, rather than as a guild-like collective of professionals.
- ²² As I finish editing this paper, a friend forwards to me an E-mail message written by Professor J. Stefano, head of Theater at Otterbein College, which states that the Board of Trustees at Otterbein College in Ohio voted last spring (1998) to "do away with all full-time Renewable Term contracts." The E-mail message states, "From now on, all full-time faculty will be hired on tenure-track. We recognize that we are bucking the national trend, but a year of research convinced us that a single contract system was best for everyone involved. It then took another two years to work out the details—and persuade a board of businessmen who fundamentally distrust tenure as a concept—but we did it." Otterbein's work serves as an example to be emulated.

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