

Contracted, Contingent, Part- Time: Coming Soon!

By John Stevenson

Ph.D., recent publications, 14 years college teaching experience. Market value: about \$1,500 per 3-credit course.

Let's see, figure four courses per semester as a normal full load at four-year colleges and universities—at many it's less—with another course or two in the summer (if any are available). It adds up to \$12,000 to \$15,000 a year. Didn't they always tell us it pays to get an education?

There are, of course, full-time teaching positions in higher education that pay quite decently—although not as well as salaries for professionals with equivalent training in nonacademic fields. But there are fewer of them, even as the ranks of persons qualified to fill them balloons.

We may, in fact, have just passed the point at which full-time instructors constitute a majority among those teaching in the American academy. Let me say that again. At present, there is every

possibility that a majority of those on the faculties of American colleges and universities are part-time employees, subject to very low pay, no job security, no fringe benefits, and no participation in the life of the department or school outside of the classroom.

The latest formal figures, from 1992, show 45 percent part-time instructors, and the situation since then has only grown worse. According to a recent national survey, only one-third of the faculty hired in the first half of the 1990s were full-time tenure-track; the rest were contract, contingent, or part-time.¹

Let me make clear my own vested interest in this topic: For the past seven years, I've earned a significant portion of my living by part-time teaching at area colleges and universities; at times, this has been my sole means of support.

A few years ago I helped to begin an organization of part-time faculty at the Columbia College Chicago. More recently, I've been

John Stevenson received his Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Chicago. The author of numerous papers and reviews, he has taught at the college level for 18 years. These facts do not ensure a full-time position in today's higher education job market, so Stevenson teaches part-time at institutions in the Chicago area, including Columbia College where he has played a leading role in organizing a union representing part-time faculty in the college.

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much involved in the successful campaign to make this organization a union affiliated with NEA and representing most part-time instructors at Columbia. We are now negotiating a first contract. So the issues here are hardly abstract for me.

At major research universities, of course, much of the teaching is done by graduate students, who are nominally supervised by a member of the graduate faculty, but who, in fact, usually carry out their teaching and grading autonomously. And, need it be added, these days, a career as part-timer awaits most graduate students upon completion of their degrees.

If we add classes taught by graduate assistants to those taught by part-time faculty, it is clear that over 50 percent of classroom work in American higher education is carried on by a workforce that is not only grossly underpaid, but has no voice in curriculum or governance and is excluded from the collegial body of the full-time faculty.

Holding a graduate degree no longer provides a mark of distinction vis-a-vis salary and status. The position of the part-timer even with a doctorate is very often at an even lower level—in terms of recompense and interaction with full-timers—than that of a graduate student.

Yet the part-time faculty mem-

ber is typically as qualified and able a teacher as his full-time counterpart—and in some cases may even be more so. That one has been hired on a part-time basis and another full-time is often a matter of little but timing and luck.

This situation, with its sharp ramifications for the traditional ideals of the academic professions and the academy itself, should be at the heart of any discussion of the contemporary American academy. But it is not. The most striking aspect of the new part-time academic majority is its official invisibility.

For example, although fairly detailed statistics on salary and benefits for full-time faculty are gathered by the federal government—and published yearly in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and by others, including NEA—no such data are gathered for part-timers or graduate assistants.

In fact, it's difficult to find any data for part-time faculty, not only what they are paid, but even on basic numbers employed. Hence, the most recent reliable statistics are six years old.

The readiest explanation for this lack of information is a basic will to ignorance. That the greatest part of undergraduate education is now carried out by a new class of academic serfs does not jibe well

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with either the public image or the self-perception of those involved in higher education. So it's most comfortable simply not to know.

A similar pattern of deliberate ignorance exists in the professional organizations of the academic disciplines. Though some—the Association of American Historians, the Modern Language Association, and Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL)—have issued statements, without enforcement procedures, setting forth minimal standards for the treatment of adjuncts, most of the discipline organizations have not done even that. Averting one's eyes seems to be the favored response to this crisis in the academy.

Such a response—besides representing a betrayal of the intellectual and analytical functions of our profession—is profoundly unhelpful, both for colleagues who teach part-time and for the situation of the full-time faculty itself.

The surge in the use of part-time faculty over the past 15 years represents, at the same time, a diminution in the proportion of full-time positions. This loss of full-time positions, in turn, has facilitated an erosion of tenure and the growth of administrative power.

We are in the midst of a restructuring of academic labor that, if allowed to run its course unopposed, likely will end with the

great majority of faculty in a situation resembling that of today's part-timers: low pay, little or no job security, and small say in curriculum and governance matters. Obviously, ignoring the problem will not make it go away.

The scope of the structural change that higher education is caught up in is demonstrated in a recent study by Sheila Slaughter and Larry Leslie.

These scholars argue that “the changes taking place currently are as great as the changes in academic labor which occurred during the last quarter of the nineteenth century.”²

This earlier period saw the creation of universities as training grounds for professionals, who “were able to position themselves between capital and labor” and negotiate “a tacit social contract with the community at large, in which they received monopolies of practice in return for disinterestedly serving the public good.”³ This development was made possible by the wealth created by the late nineteenth century phase of capitalist development.

The current period is seeing changes that the authors call “academic capitalism.” These changes are a response by universities to political-economic changes that Slaughter and Leslie call a move-

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ment “from an industrial to a postindustrial society”⁴ and that others have called the emergence of “late capitalism” or a “post-Fordist” economic system.

Slaughter and Leslie’s study analyzes the consequences of these changes in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia. In all four countries, “given the fiscal constraints imposed by conservative supply-side economic and debt-reduction policies, less public money was available for postsecondary education, and what new money was available was concentrated in technoscience and market-related fields ...”⁵

The results of these policies: increased enrollments in higher education with less cost to government.

The research by Slaughter and Leslie suggests that academic capitalism involves a tighter relationship between universities and those corporations that can provide the needed external resources.

Slaughter and Leslie’s thesis is simply that “academic capitalism” has been the main response by universities and senior faculty to the fiscal crisis created by the lessening of state support for higher education.

This response has been encouraged and facilitated by national

governments and has begun to change the nature of universities in important ways.

Among the major changes:

- a shift of greater power to administrators, with consequent changes in governance.
- greater independence and self-reliance for departments and individuals who do well in the regime of academic capitalism, and a decline in the ideal and reality of the university as a community.
- less faculty and administrative time and resources spent on instruction.
- a weakening of the distinction between basic and applied research and a shift in the center of the academy “from a liberal arts core to an entrepreneurial periphery.”⁷

Slaughter and Leslie conclude with a worst-and best-case scenario. In the worst, full-time faculty become small cores managing large contingents of part-timers, graduate assistants, and technical staff—all, presumably, at low wages.

Note the authors: “The concept of the university as a community of scholars will disintegrate further, and management will replace governance.”⁸

In the end, full-timers who have not entrenched themselves in academic capitalism will come to be

Change will be initiated by those most directly and adversely affected, especially by part-time faculty.

hired on the same basis as part-timers: lower pay, limited contracts, and little or no participation in curriculum and governance decisions.

In the best case, which is dependent upon national budget deficit reduction and modest increases in state aid to public research universities, the authors postulate a sort of stabilization of academic capitalism and more flexibility for full-time faculty who “develop small, fluid interdisciplinary units that are matched more closely with student demand and the external world.”⁹

It seems clear that the “worst case scenario” simply represents the outcome of the spontaneous play of the current dynamic in higher education. The “best case,” on the other hand, with its freezing of the current state of affairs and its assumption of universities’ role as handmaids of corporate capital, is hardly attractive either. Is there any alternative?

I believe there is. Large social and economic forces are at work here, it’s true, but this is no reason to remain passive. History—the forming of labor unions, for example—shows that adverse structural conditions can be changed.

But, it seems clear by this point, such a drive for change will be spearheaded neither by the vari-

ous academic professional organizations nor by the tenured full-time faculty.

Such a process, if it happens, will be initiated by those most directly and adversely affected: the disempowered members of the college or university community—graduate students and the disenfranchised ranks of faculty and staff, including most especially the ever growing ranks of part-time faculty.

As to what form such action will take—well, who knows? But it’s difficult to see how any basic structural change will occur without unionization of at least the lower ranks—part-time faculty and teaching assistants—for only a union will give them autonomous, legally protected, and institutionalized power.

The situation, although dire, is also ripe with opportunity. Part-time faculty, in particular, offer a great organizing opportunity to any union that will bend its efforts towards that goal. This is a burgeoning and disaffected group, which has not only been greatly and adversely affected by developments of the last decade and more, but which is becoming more and more conscious of the injustice and intolerability of its position.

Of course, part-timers are a difficult group to organize: There is a high degree of turnover, their iden-

tification with a particular college or university may be tenuous, and they are rarely if ever at the same place physically at the same time. Yet, as our own experience at Columbia College Chicago demonstrates, such difficulties can be overcome.

Higher education in the United

States is in the midst of a profound crisis that has adversely affected the interests of the professors and researchers who work within it.

The best way we can solve the new problems that beset us is through some very traditional means: unity, organization, and struggle. ■

Endnotes

- ¹ Schuster, 1996, cited in Rhoades and Slaughter, 1997.
- ² Slaughter and Leslie, 1997, p. 1
- ³ *Ibid.*, 3.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 207.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 243.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 245.

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