

# Instead of Gaslighting Adjuncts, We Could Help Them

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By Annemarie Pérez

As academics who've made it to the tenure track, what can we do to help the adjuncts and underemployed Ph.D.s who haven't? I mean, instead of just gaslighting them and insisting that the dismal faculty job market "was ever thus."

I received my Ph.D. from the University of Southern California's English department in spring 2011. This past fall, I started work as an assistant professor of interdisciplinary studies at California State University-Dominguez Hills. It's my dream job, teaching a student population I love in my home city of Los Angeles. Between 2011 and 2017 I was an adjunct at multiple colleges and universities in the Los Angeles area.

Because I got a tenure-track job, at a place where I'd been a contingent faculty member, a friend suggested I write about getting hired on the tenure track. For a while I demurred — in part because I think contingent faculty members who want to move to the tenure track are far too likely to blame themselves when they don't, and feel that they're failing. I don't want to contribute to that by enumerating the things I did, or tried to do, to stay in the academic job market — as if doing those things was a path to success. I have my job because I was lottery-level lucky.

Here's a few of the ways I had a lot of luck. First, I finished my Ph.D. in English in Los Angeles. The city has a large number of college and universities that don't have their own Ph.D. students. That means it's not so hard to break into the adjunct pool in this town, and it's

possible to get enough work across campuses to keep body and soul together.

Many of the area's institutions are unionized (or fear unionization), so pay is on the higher end of national adjunct rates. Teaching five to seven classes a semester on three to four campuses, I earned more than \$40,000 a year. I was also fortunate that I'd worked during the summers of graduate school as a campus and freelance American Psychological Association style editor (seriously, that was not planning on my part, just a desire to get paid over the summer and not teach a lot). So I also had a reasonably steady stream of freelance and consulting clients.

Second, although my degree is in English, my specialization is in Chicana feminist writings. This field has a long history of theoretical and historical work being done by people in contingent positions or outside academe. What that meant was not being in a full-time tenured position was never (as far as I could tell) held against me or used to minimize the importance of my research. I know that is not the experience of a number of adjuncts doing research, and that experiencing such routine dismissal of your work from tenured scholars is soul-destroying.

Third, I don't have children, I have a partner with a steady job and health benefits, and we live in a rent-controlled apartment that we found when I was in grad school. So I rarely had to worry about meeting basic expenses, and that the money I earned from my freelance work could go to paying for me to attend conferences, including the job fair at the annual convention of the Modern Language Association.

My partner and I aren't place-bound, so I was able to apply for jobs across the country. My only limitation was that I wasn't willing to uproot us for a temporary position — if my partner was going to give up a job, it needed to be for something with more than one or two years of security.

Fourth, the University of Southern California English department allows its graduates to participate in semester-long workshops on preparing for the tenure-track market. Even though I was no longer in grad school, I was able to work closely with faculty graduate advisers, each year I was on the market, on putting together my job materials and preparing for interviews.

Even with all of that, however, I absolutely believe I would not have been hired had it not been for the radical way that the department chair treated adjunct instructors at the first university where I was hired to teach.

I interviewed with Karen Mary Davalos, who was chair of Chicana/o studies at Loyola Marymount University, in Los Angeles (she is now a professor at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities). She saw the use of adjuncts as exploitation and felt deeply responsible for her part in it — even though, as a chair at Loyola, she was required to hire contingent instructors.

As part of my job interview, she asked me what my career goals were. I told her I wanted a tenure-track job — preferably teaching somewhere with a significant population of students of color.

That was good, she said, because her goal was to get her department's adjunct faculty

members hired into tenure-track positions. She said I should see adjuncting as something I was doing on my way to being hired into a full-time job. She also cited the number of people who had worked in her department and where they were now faculty members. She said that by hiring me, she was making a commitment to help me get hired into a full-time position.

What did her commitment mean in practice?

Basically, she treated me as if I had a postdoc at the university (except for what I was paid, she couldn't control my salary). That meant she observed my classes, discussed my teaching with me, and wrote up recommendations for improvement. She made sure I had office space with a working computer, access to printing, and work-study student support. She offered to read my research and give me comments on articles I was working on.

Perhaps the most important act of all: She told me she was doing this so she could write a strong and knowledgeable letter of recommendation.

And she did. Every year I was on the job market, she went over my job materials and accomplishments from the previous year and made suggestions for improvement. Every year — even when she was no longer chair and I was no longer working for that department — she got her letter updated and uploaded to Interfolio, the job-credentials service, by the date she said she would.

Every year.

She did practice interviews with me and got someone she respected to do a mock online interview to test my setup. She sought me out at conferences and introduced me to her friends and told them about my work. Through it all, she talked with me about her own research and asked for my advice, while also discussing my research and her thoughts on it.

Never, by anything she said or did, was I made to feel that I was anything less than a colleague doing work that was significant for our shared field. She never acted as if my not getting the (many) jobs I interviewed for, year after year, was in any way a personal failing.

She did all of those things without my having to ask — she consistently and repeatedly offered her help and guidance. When I welcomed it (who wouldn't?), she offered more. She did likewise for the other people who adjuncted for her while she was chair. By the time I got hired, she knew me and my work better than any other senior scholar, including those who'd advised my dissertation.

I'm writing this because — reading on Twitter and elsewhere — I see how badly scholars with tenure feel about the academic job market and about the predicament of people adjuncting in their departments or at their colleges and universities. I offer this chronicle as something those of us with tenure or on the tenure track can do to help people trying to move into full-time employment, who may feel alone and ashamed that they haven't been hired into the sort of work they expected they would do after graduate school.

We don't have to just wring our hands about how terrible the situation is, or, worse still, say the

job market has always been terrible and those who are adjuncts should never have started a Ph.D. if they weren't willing to be exploited.

Reaching out and offering to help even one other person in concrete ways — taking responsibility to support and advise someone for the long term — can make a huge difference. This is true whether the person is hired into a full-time gig or eventually decides to leave academe. This sort of mentoring values adjunct scholars and treats them with care and dignity.

This is work that matters.

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