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There Is No Excuse for How Universities Treat Adjuncts

Students are paying higher tuition than ever. Why can't more of that revenue go to the people teaching them?

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In early June, California labor regulators ruled that a driver for Uber, the app-based car service, was, in fact, an employee, not an independent contractor,

and deserved back pay. The decision made national news, with experts predicting a coming flood of lawsuits. Two weeks later, FedEx agreed to a \$288 million settlement after a federal appeals court ruled that the company had shortchanged 2,300 California delivery drivers on pay and benefits by improperly labeling them as independent contractors. The next month, the company lost another case in a federal appeals court over misclassifying 500 delivery drivers in Kansas. Meanwhile, since January, trucking firms operating out of the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach have lost two major court battles with drivers who claim that they, too, have been robbed of wages by being misclassified as independent contractors.

If you think you notice a pattern here, you're right. After years of inertia, courts and regulators are starting to take on companies that categorize employees as contractors in order to avoid wage and benefit costs. With inequality and the declining middle class becoming major issues in the 2016 presidential race, politicians (at least on the Democratic side) are now also vowing to do something about the plight of contingent workers. "I'll crack down on bosses who exploit employees by misclassifying them as contractors or even steal their wages," Hillary Clinton said in her big economic-policy speech in July.

The ranks of this "contingent workforce"—defined as temporary and part-time workers and independent contractors—have been growing for decades. From 2006 to 2010, their numbers swelled from 35.3 percent of the employed to 40.4 percent, according to data from the U.S. Government Accountability Office. This trend isn't altogether bad. Plenty of part-timers, freelancers, and contractors prefer the freedom that comes from itinerant and independent work. And such work is often the result of innovations that lower barriers to entry in otherwise closed markets—the way Uber's app, for instance, allows amateurs with cars to compete with licensed taxi drivers and owners.

The problem is that such arrangements can lead to exploitation: In their winning lawsuit, for example, the California FedEx drivers complained that the company shifted hundreds of millions of dollars in costs onto them, from

buying and maintaining their FedEx-branded trucks to following FedEx schedules that didn't allow for meal breaks and overtime. Not surprisingly, contingent workers in general report lower job satisfaction, lower pay per hour, and fewer fringe benefits than workers in the same industries with more traditional employment, according to the GAO.

Thirty-one percent of part-time faculty are living near or below the federal poverty line.

Less-skilled workers—truck drivers, hotel maids, office temps—typically bear the brunt of these contingent arrangements, but the practice is also moving into the professional classes. Thanks to a glut of law-school grads and a slumping legal business, the number of attorneys working part-time has grown from 2.4 percent in 1994 to 6.1 percent in 2013. Other educated professions, from architecture to mainstream journalism, have seen similar shifts.

Nowhere has the up-classing of contingency work gone farther, ironically, than in one of the most educated and (back in the day) secure sectors of the workforce: college teachers. In 1969, almost 80 percent of college faculty members were tenure or tenure track. Today, the numbers have essentially flipped, with two-thirds of faculty now non-tenure and half of those working only part-time, often with several different teaching jobs.

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Why this should be so is not immediately obvious. Unlike the legal and the traditional news industries, higher education has been booming in recent years. Nor does higher ed seem to follow the pattern of other industries being transformed by contingent employment. In his book *The Fissured Workplace*, David Weil

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of the Boston University School of Management (and currently the administrator of the U.S. Wage and Hour Division in the U.S. Department of Labor) writes that the growth of contingent employment is being driven mostly by firms focusing on their core businesses and outsourcing the rest of the work to contractors. But teaching students is—or at least is *supposed* to be—the core mission of higher education. That colleges and universities have turned more and more of their frontline employees into part-time contractors suggests how far they have drifted from what they say they are all about (teaching students) to what they are increasingly all about (conducting research, running sports franchises, or, among for-profits, delivering shareholder value).

To be sure, the old tenure system has its problems, and the rise of the contingent professoriate has its advantages—chief among them allowing fresh teaching talent into the higher education system, often people with more real-world experience than the regular faculty. The problem is that universities are using their power in ways that shortchange both contingent teachers and, ultimately, students. With courts and politicians increasingly questioning the fairness and legality of contingent work in industries like transportation, institutions of higher learning could soon be facing scrutiny, too.

* * *

Some trace the practice of hiring part-time instructors to a time when most schools didn't allow women as full professors, and thus adjunct positions were associated with female instructors from the start. Eileen Schell, author of *Gypsy Academics and Mother-Teachers: Gender, Contingent Labor, and Writing Instruction*, notes that these contingent faculty members were referred to as “the housewives of higher education.” My parents lived out that exact paradigm. Both professors, my father was full-time and tenured and my mother was originally tenure track until a move accompanying my father got

her only a non-tenured position as an “instructor” as part of a “package” created to lure my father to Stanford. There my mother worked with a cohort of part-time faculty wives who were given little respect and even less in wages. Women still make up the majority of contingent teachers, with estimates as high as 61 percent. (By contrast, 59 percent of full-time tenured faculty are men.)

A neighbor of mine, Mitch Tropin, teaches at six different colleges in the D.C. area. Through a combination of perseverance and good karma, he has been able to align his three Baltimore schools so he teaches there on the same days, allowing him to minimize commuting time. He always aims for employment at six schools because, he says, “You never know when a class will be cancelled or a full-time professor will bump you at the last minute. Sometimes classes just disappear.” Another D.C. adjunct, Tanya Paperny, who doesn’t have a car, has done her commute by bike and public transportation, making her days stretch to 13 hours.

To say that these are low-wage jobs is an understatement. Based on data from the American Community Survey, 31 percent of part-time faculty are living near or below the federal poverty line. And, according to the UC Berkeley Labor Center, one in four families of part-time faculty are enrolled in at least one public assistance program like food stamps and Medicaid or qualify for the Earned Income Tax Credit. Known as the “Homeless Prof,” Mary-Faith Cerasoli teaches romance languages and prepares her courses in friends’ apartments when she can crash on a couch, or in her car when the friends can’t take her in. When a student asked to meet with her during office hours, she responded, “Sure, it’s the Pontiac Vibe parked on Stewart Avenue.”

When an adjunct carries similar responsibilities as full-time staff but for less than half the salary, colleges may be evading their legal obligations as

employers.

Naomi Winterfalcon, who teaches at Champlain College in Burlington, Vermont, is happy that she was able to get another job this year and stay off food stamps for the summer. A recent study shows that a large portion of universities and colleges limit their adjuncts' teaching hours **to avoid having to provide the health insurance** now required for full-timers under the Affordable Care Act.

But apart from feeling sorry for the underpaid faculty, why should we care that college professors have the same job conditions as day laborers, fast-food workers, cashiers, taxi drivers, or home-care aides? They did, after all, choose to pursue a career in higher ed. Administrators at these institutions of higher learning argue that they need to use adjuncts because it is the only way to keep tuition from rising even faster than it has. And isn't access to education the higher good?

If the rationale for using low-wage professorial labor is affordable college, however, it hasn't worked. Tuition increases inspire awe at their size—public universities cost three times what they cost in 1980, private universities twice as much. As universities have added amenities like squash courts and luxury dorms, their spending has increased threefold, but the student-teacher ratio remains the same as it was in the past. If you think these tuition increases resulted from an investment in providing a better education for the students in the classroom, consider the growth in administrative staff and administrative pay.

Even while keeping funding for instruction relatively flat, universities increased the number of administrator positions by 60 percent between 1993 and 2009, 10 times the rate at which they added tenured positions. In the old days, different professors would take their turn as dean for this or that and then happily escape back to scholarship and teaching. Now the administration

exists as an end in itself and a career path disconnected from the faculty and pursuit of knowledge. Writing a few years ago for this publication, the Johns Hopkins professor Benjamin Ginsberg described colleges and universities as now being “filled with armies of functionaries—vice presidents, associate vice presidents, assistant vice presidents, provosts, associate provosts, vice provosts, deans, deanlets, and deanlings, all of whom command staffers and assistants—who, more and more, direct the operations of every school.” So while college tuition surged from 2003 to 2013 by 94 percent at public institutions and 74 percent at private, nonprofit schools, and student debt has climbed to over \$1.2 trillion, much of that money has been going to ensure higher pay for a burgeoning legion of bureaucrats.

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As administrators make more and more faculty positions part-time, allegedly for cost savings, they don't apply that same logic to themselves. While the part-time professor is now the norm, the percentage of part-time administrators has actually gone *down*. Their salaries, too, unlike those of professors, continue to go up, increasing by 50 percent between 1998 and 2003 even while tuition was going up and faculty numbers were going down. Estimates put the increase in average salaries for CEOs at public institutions at 75 percent between 1978 and 2013 and at 170 percent at private institutions. As Ginsberg reported, “[I]n January 2009, facing \$19 million in budget cuts and a hiring freeze, Florida Atlantic University awarded raises of 10 percent or more to top administrators, including the school's president.”

Even if the cost of a college education weren't increasing, the amount of the

money in the budget for non-classroom-related activities would have a negative effect. In 2013, colleges and universities devoted less than a third of their revenue to instruction, and, in 2011, at the end of the recession, despite growth in revenue, public and private research universities cropped their education-related spending. One adjunct teacher, JJ, posting a comment online, calculated his/her pay as an adjunct as \$65 per student per semester, adding up to the princely sum of \$2,000, noting that “each student paid \$45,000 in tuition and took about 4 classes a semester.... I think their parents would be rather upset to learn that only \$65 of the \$45,000 went to pay one professor for an entire semester.”

Of course, what parents really care about is whether their students are benefiting from the money they're spending. So the real question is whether the shift to adjunct teaching has helped or hurt education outcomes. That turns out to be a hard question to answer definitively, because comprehensive data on student outcomes is hard to come by and the variety among adjuncts (part-time, full-time, graduate students, and so on) and schools (selective schools, open-admissions schools) makes comparisons difficult without good data. According to some research, adjuncts get high marks. One study found that freshmen at Northwestern University learned *more* in introductory classes taught by non-tenured faculty. Another study, of a public four-year school in Ohio, showed that students who took science and engineering classes from adjuncts were more likely to take more classes in those fields, especially if the adjuncts were older (the authors theorized that the real-world industry experience of these older instructors may have captured the students' imaginations).

Other research, however, points strongly in the opposite direction. A study of community-college students found that those who had more exposure to part-time teachers were less likely to transfer to four-year universities. Another detailed study of six public universities within one state found that at four of those schools, freshmen who had more time with part-time faculty were substantially less likely to return sophomore year. Interestingly, however, at

the other two universities in that state, freshmen with higher exposure to part-time teachers were slightly *more* likely to persist to sophomore year. The difference, the researchers discovered, is that these two schools gave their part-time instructors more support, including them, for instance, in new-faculty orientation programs.

This last finding gets to the larger point. As a class, adjuncts probably aren't any worse at teaching than tenured professors (who, for the most part, aren't hired for their teaching ability). What seems to make a difference is how adjuncts are treated. At most schools, adjuncts simply aren't getting the tools, training, support, or even status that they need to do their job. Mary Grabar, who worked as an adjunct for many years, [sums it up](#):

Consider the harried part-timer pulling her cart from the car to the “office.” This was necessary, for in most places one could expect at most part of a file drawer for storage, or if she had some seniority among adjuncts, a small locker for her coat and papers next to a cubicle in the hallway near the regular faculty offices. At the state university we had one large room called “The Bullpen.” It contained cast-off desks and chairs. If your office hour happened to not be at a popular time, you would be lucky and get a place to sit, along with a chair for your student. I seemed to get the desk with the worst chair, one which required a delicate balancing act, as it wobbled precipitously. There was certainly no leaning back into a reverie about the poetry I was about to teach! That was too dangerous.

And Grabar says she certainly didn't have much time to spare for students with similar reveries, or students who simply had questions.

With contracts that last only a semester, adjuncts are hard-pressed to do more than just find the next term's job—updating their courses, mentoring students, and writing letters of recommendation has to come out of time in which they are writing their own applications or traveling across town to teach at campus number three. As JJ commented online, “Did making so little money affect my job performance? Yes. I missed a week of class once due to being hospitalized for stress and exhaustion. Working 40-50 [hours a week] for a grand total of \$4000 over four months ... working extra jobs on top of that to cover my rent and to buy my health insurance and taking other extra jobs to cover my student loans nearly killed me.”

The Delphi Project on the Changing Faculty and Student Success, based at the University of Southern California, studies the recruitment and hiring process for adjunct instructors. Adjuncts are often hired just days before a class begins, giving them little time for preparation or orientation to the school, the students, or the policies on grading and faculty-student interaction.

My neighbor Mitch Tropin argues that “the problem is that most adjuncts do a good job, but are put in an unfair situation.” In addition to poverty wages, long hours, and lack of office space, the isolation from other teachers can be a real problem. Naomi Winterfalcon at Champlain College told me that she knew few people in her department until the adjunct instructors unionized. Champlain, she explains, uses “lots of adjuncts,” but she had never met most of them, even those in her department. Once they organized, however, they began to meet each other in union meetings. “It makes a big difference if you are able to talk to each other. It allows us to improve ourselves academically as well as our working environment,” she says, and it “facilitates better teaching to have others who are in the same circumstances to talk through problems, share experiences, and strategize how to solve them.”

A spokesperson for Champlain declined to comment on Winterfalcon's account, on the grounds that the college is currently in negotiations with the adjuncts' union. He did, however, note that Champlain's adjuncts have faculty representatives in the college's government.

Without job security, adjuncts may lack the independence they need to challenge students by critiquing commonly accepted ideas.

What makes the situation even worse is that adjuncts are often disproportionately assigned the courses filled with the students who need the most assistance, such as introductory courses, freshman-writing classes, or remedial education. Incoming students often need basic grammar and composition skills, which requires the kind of intensive hands-on teaching that is difficult for a part-timer with full-time teaching hours and insufficient support to provide.

And there's a more subtle danger lurking in contingency: With no job security, precarious financial situations, and weak institutional support, adjunct professors may lack the independence and status they need to challenge students by presenting unpopular positions, critiquing commonly accepted ideas, or even giving out poor grades. Academic freedom doesn't mean much in these circumstances. And while we tend to see academic freedom as protection for provocative scholarship, it also performs the even more important function of facilitating discussion and debate in the classroom. Greg Lukianoff, the president and CEO of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, finds the potential for censorship and self-censorship in the adjunct system "troubling," and adds, "I think at minimum adjuncts should have contracts with both terms of several years and promises of academic

freedom.”

When professors know that students’ assessments may be the only evaluation they receive and thus are the most significant factor in whether they will be hired for another semester, they have little incentive to grade critically and instead may grade to please, resulting in grade inflation and permissiveness of students’ wrong-headed ideas or disruptive behavior. The system gives students leverage to attack a teacher they may not like or to avoid the consequences of their own academic failure.

* * *

Tenure also has its critics, and not without reason. Compelling arguments that the decision-making process is opaque, allowing bias to go undetected, and that safeguarding positions allows deadwood professors to keep their positions, all make tenure worth a critical second look. My father’s experience reflected the upsides of the old regime: A young professor moves laterally to get a tenure-track position, gets tenure, and then jumps again for more prestige, in my father’s case an endowed chair. He had an office, kept office hours, prepared his own curriculum, was invited to faculty seminars and programs on pedagogical advances, and had staff support and other resources so he could focus on teaching and scholarship rather than on seeking the next opening to teach a course and driving between campuses. My father served as mentor, emotional support, and intellectual guide for several generations of young scholars, while at the same time pursuing his own cutting-edge scholarship. Even among those academics who didn’t share this trajectory, 80 percent were still full-time and eligible for tenure. While there are still professors who enjoy the benefits of tenure and the emoluments that go along with that status, many of their colleagues make up the proletariat of the ivory tower, with no hope of advancement, abysmal wages, and no job security.

Some adjuncts are refusing to accept the status quo. Across the country, many of them have turned to the Service Employees International Union, the United Autoworkers, the American Federation of Teachers, and other unions to

improve their lot. Mary-Faith Cerasoli attends rallies in her “Homeless Prof” vest. In D.C., the SEIU, led by adjuncts including Mitch Tropin, has successfully pushed for contracts at American University, Howard, Georgetown, George Washington, Montgomery College, and, just recently, at Trinity, meaning that the majority of adjuncts in the D.C. area are now represented by the union. Fighting under the banner of the “Fight for \$15,” like fast-food workers, they argue that they should be paid \$15,000 per course—which would equal \$90,000 annually for a professor with three courses per semester. (Given that the American Association of University Professors estimates the average earnings for assistant professors at \$62,500 to \$76,900 and for associate professors at \$75,220 to \$91,200, this figure is truly aspirational at this point.) While some schools like Georgetown have accepted unions without too much fuss, others have adopted the tactics long used by anti-labor businesses: falsely accusing labor officials of earning exorbitant salaries, hiring law firms that specialize in union busting, and firing those involved in the campaign. But many adjuncts are committed to the fight. Tiffany Kraft, who teaches at four different institutions in the Portland, Oregon, area says, “What do we have to lose? We’ve been scared into complicity for so long, but I didn’t go through fourteen years of higher education to be treated like shit.”

Traditional higher-learning institutions face another threat besides unions and online competition, in the form of lawsuits. The Delphi Project’s Adrianna Kezar calls on university boards to exercise oversight. Writing in *Trusteeship* magazine for the Association of Governing Boards, she recommends that colleges and universities examine their use of adjuncts, because over-reliance on contingent teachers may place “their institutions at greater risk of becoming involved in a class-action lawsuit related to their employment practices.”

With courses that need to be taught every semester led by an interchangeable set of adjuncts, the schools seem to be doing just what trucking companies, housecleaning services, and now app-driven businesses such as Uber and Lyft

have been accused of doing: misclassifying workers as contractors. Especially when a teacher is asked to carry out similar responsibilities as full-time permanent staff but for less than half the salary, there may be grounds to believe that universities and colleges are evading their legal obligations as employers. And with the overrepresentation of women in these jobs, it seems possible that many of these universities could be violating not only labor laws but civil-rights laws as well.

Alyssa Colton, for example, the subject of an NBC News story earlier this year, was hired initially as a full-time teacher with benefits at the College of St. Rose in Albany, New York. The college did not renew her contract four years later, but after a semester had gone by, it rehired her as a part-time instructor without health insurance or pension contributions. “I essentially took a pay cut,” Colton told NBC, “doing the same work for less money and less respect.” Because her husband’s business had failed a couple years before, Colton’s move from full-time employee to adjunct meant that the family had to go on food stamps and Medicaid, and they now qualify for the Earned Income Tax Credit.

Kezar fears that there is no going back to my father’s era, when most positions were tenured or tenure track. Instead, she favors simply adopting longer contracts with benefits, which would bridge the gap between the tenured faculty and the rest of the instructors. At Georgetown, the so-called “half-fulls” are paid a rate proportional to the full-timers and have some measure of job security.

If you have any doubt that colleges can treat front-line educators well and still deliver quality instruction at a reasonable price, consider Western Governors University. As *Washington Monthly* [detailed in 2011](#), Western Governors is a nonprofit online institution that has discovered a way to provide accredited college degrees at a fraction of the cost of their competitors. What’s remarkable is that they’ve done this using a workforce that provides students with academic coaching and mentoring from home offices and kitchen tables

across the country and yet enjoys full-time hours and good benefits. Clearly, it's possible to deliver a quality product at a relatively low cost while still paying your educators fairly.

One way or another, something has to give. Judges and regulators are taking a harder look at companies that misclassify their workers as contractors, and Democratic front-runner Hillary Clinton is promising to crack down hard on the practice. Unions are moving in to organize adjuncts, with some success. And pressure continues to build on the higher-education sector to allow the federal government to collect data on student outcomes. That's the single best way to provide policymakers as well as colleges and universities with the data they need to determine which kinds of instructors (tenured or adjunct, part-time or full-time) serve which group of students best, and what kinds of support (training, office hours, wages) they need to do their jobs.

In the end, it may all come down to results. By creating an inferior product that is too expensive and doesn't satisfy students, parents, employers, or academics, traditional institutions are either going to change how they're doing things voluntarily and proactively or they'll be forced into it by innovative competitors, legislators, regulators, and the courts.

This post appears courtesy of [The Washington Monthly](#).



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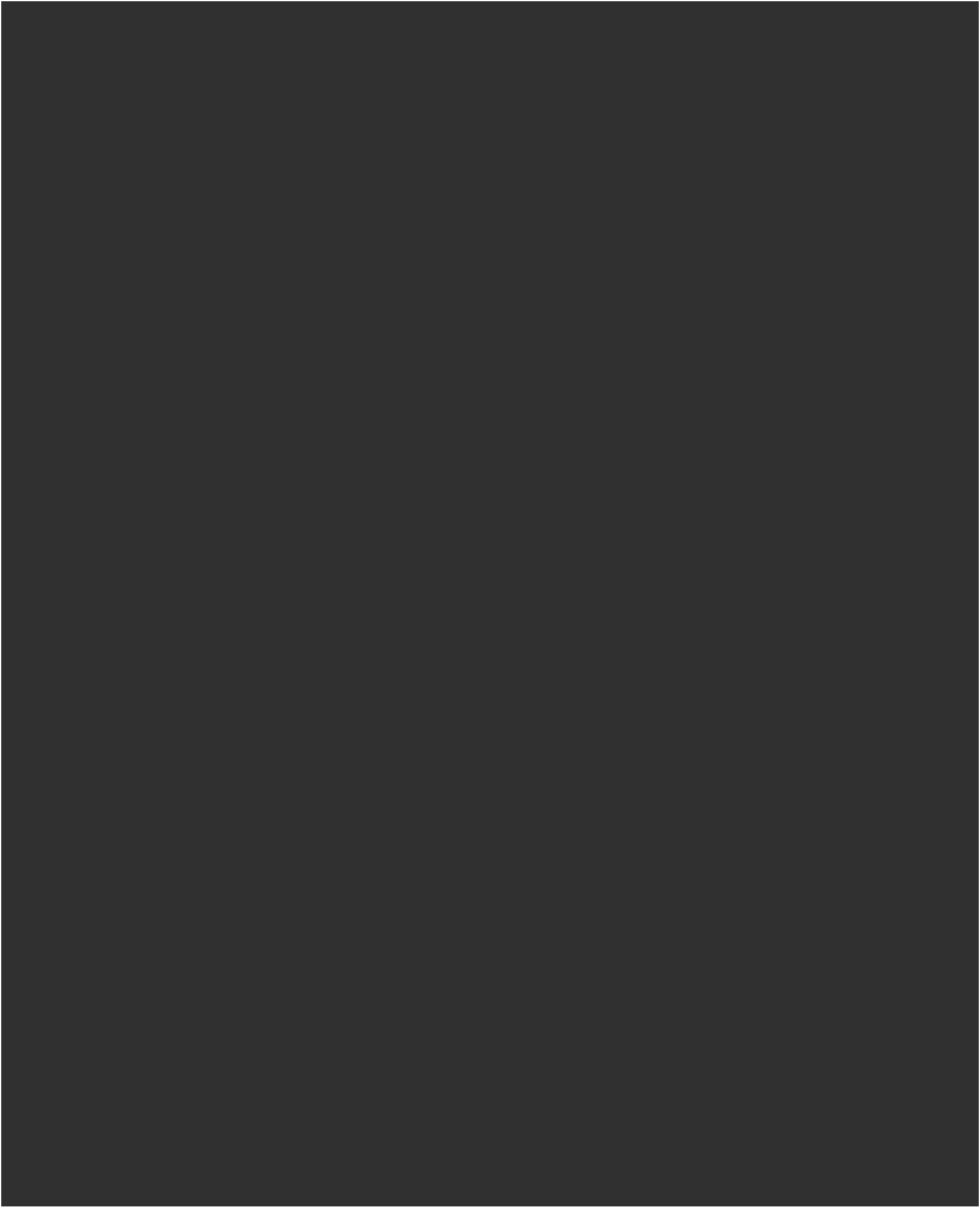
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