

Universities think I'm disposable, but my non-tenured status makes me a better teacher



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For the past fifteen years, I've taught first-year writing at a small liberal arts college, and though I teach essentially the same course every semester, I never get bored. The students I work with are on the brink of adulthood, and their energy is exhilarating. They are goofy and raw, flinging themselves confidently into the world, yet they are full of self-doubt at times. With these students, I try to create a classroom environment that encourages uninhibited free thought and conversation. And yet, no matter what I do or achieve in the classroom, my pedagogical accomplishments will always be perceived as inferior to those of my colleagues. I am "contingent faculty," otherwise known as an adjunct professor, hired each year on an as-needed basis, though the college always seems to need me.

In the past fifteen years, I've taught approximately 40 courses, all but two of them intensive first-year writing. I am happy with the compensation I receive for the work I do, but I teach on one-year contracts, and I often don't know until early summer if I'll have a job for the next academic year. If I am hired to teach three courses, I qualify for benefits. Often, I am hired to teach two, and late in the fall semester another course is added for the spring, which demands nimble footwork from the people in payroll and human resources and scrambles my personal finances. One year, I was asked to add a third section of composition in a single term the night before classes started.

Almost anything could impact my employment status from year to year: enrollment, administrative whim, the decision by a tenured professor in another discipline to try their hand at teaching writing. Because of this uncertainty, it feels as though my performance in the classroom has little to do with whether or not I am offered courses in a given year; this is often true for adjuncts. Because our teaching is so rarely observed (colleges and universities seldom invest time and resources in supporting adjuncts' teaching), we rely on our student evaluations for evidence of our effectiveness, for proof of our very existence in the institution where we feel so often overlooked.

If our evaluations are bad, we may not get asked back. But good evaluations are no guarantee of anything. We are not encumbered by any sense of a safety net; the lack of one forces us to stay fresh, because there is no getting comfortable when you have no idea if you'll have a job from year to year. Tenured faculty know that pretty much no matter what they do, they'll be back, and though they argue that they are able to take risks because of this security, equally likely is that their effort will be dimmed, that they will care a little bit less for not having to worry. The edge is harder to hold onto when the landing is soft.

Adjuncts, on the other hand, feel free, and perhaps even compelled, to take chances in the classroom, like having blunt, often uncomfortable, conversations about things like dorm damage and rape culture, about issues and problems on campus and within academia. Pre-tenure faculty depend on student evaluations for promotion and advancement. If students dislike them, rate them poorly, complain to the administration about them, it is their career on the line. I don't have a career. If my institution decides not to use me, I am free to find work elsewhere. I can afford to level with my students, risking their displeasure, because in order for me to keep wanting to do what I do, I need evaluations that demonstrate that I have helped educate my students, not just made them happy. I can only do that by pushing them out of their comfort zones, with all possible repercussions.

I realize that this position is counterintuitive to the whole idea of tenure, and that it contradicts the belief that adjuncts teach to the evaluations, because they operate, the thinking goes, on the assumption that good evaluations are the

only way they get asked back. Supposedly, tenure encourages edginess and boundary-pushing, because tenure is designed to protect intellectual freedom. Too often, though, tenure breeds complacency. When faculty refuse to serve on committees or attend meetings, or when their teaching becomes rote and uninspired, there is little a college or university can do. The National Education Association claims that 2% of tenured faculty are dismissed from their positions every year (<http://www.nea.org/home/33067.htm>), but they don't offer details about how often this is due to some sort of gross misconduct versus a dean of faculty or a committee deciding that a tenured professor has just been mailing it in for too long. Professors who are just uninterested in or too far removed from their students' realities to connect with them in any meaningful way? From what I've seen at the various schools I've taught at over the years, they'll keep their jobs as long as they want them. Tenure guarantees a professor the right to due process if an institution wants to remove them, and the institution must compile evidence for removal. Lukewarm or even negative student evaluations of a tenured professor won't get much attention unless there are other issues of incompetence or unprofessional behavior to address.

But I, not knowing from year to year if I'll have a job, feel free to swing for the fences. When every semester I teach could be my last, why go out giving anything less than my best effort? I fear only losing what it is I love about teaching: the chance to see what happens when I don't hold back and when my students don't, either. For example, I feel compelled to confront students who have always been told their work is perfect. A couple of years ago, a student sat crying in my office because all her fears, she said, had come true. "I knew that being a good high school writer wouldn't mean anything when I got to college!" She had learned how to produce thorough, precise, intellectually sterile essays. I was offering a seemingly chaotic process that encouraged exploration and experimentation: extensive overwriting without attention to grammar or syntax in the early stages. By the end of the term, she was handing in powerful work.

As an adjunct, I am in the institution but not of it. I've seen the best of what academia has to offer: genuine passion for teaching and learning, collegiality and cooperation and respect among colleagues. I've also seen the worst: bitter divisions, power grabs, posturing, language designed only to assert the speaker's sense of superiority. (I once counted how many times a colleague used the word "epistemological" in a routine English department meeting: seven). I have been on the receiving end of innumerable kindnesses; I have also been the target of vicious personal attacks designed to remind me of my low status. But mostly, I have been invisible. Whether I am there or not seems not to matter; only recently has any effort been made to engage me in conversation about the teaching of writing, for example, despite my years of experience. Many times in the past, my attempts to contribute were rebuffed. To many of the tenured faculty, my presence is a seemingly unhappy reminder of loose ends, the untidy extra classes at the fringes of the curriculum that I am sent in to clean up. My otherness has seemed to perplex some of my colleagues; they don't know quite what to do with me. A professor who had just been awarded tenure expressed disbelief when I asked for my teaching to be observed: "Why would you want the scrutiny we have to go through?" The answer, to me, seemed obvious: I wanted to get better. But I also wanted some acknowledgment.