Portrait of a Budget Cut

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Hi. My name is Sara, and I'm a budget cut.

This story begins late last school year, when I was standing in front of my Introduction to Film class, getting set up for the day's session. The technology in the classroom was often glitchy, so I'd given myself plenty of time. I chatted with my teaching assistant about the new *Twin Peaks* while logging in to my email to retrieve the PowerPoint I'd sent myself.

That's when I saw the message from my department with the subject header "2017-2018 Budget Cuts." "Well, that can't be good," I thought and clicked to open it. It began, "Dear Sara, As you might know, the university is in the midst of a significant budget cut across all units for Financial Year 2018, which starts July 1." And it ended, "Within this context, we unfortunately will not be able to offer the courses that we projected for you in 2017-2018. I am sorry to let you know about this development …"

The extent of my reflection at that moment was "Fuck," because my class was about to start. I did my job -- facilitated the discussion, answered questions, explained assignments -- but in the back of my head, all I could see was my complicated Jenga tower of an existence teetering precariously as the department pulled out the linchpin.

Maybe you've guessed by now that I'm an adjunct. I wear the scarlet A. I am part of the academic underclass. Those unwashed masses who are somehow still made to feel like each of us did this to ourselves through personal weakness and lack of talent, even though we're the "new faculty majority."

But at the public university where I'd been teaching for three and half years, I wasn't an adjunct anymore. I was a budget cut.

So, let me tell you a little bit about what it means to be a budget cut.

Earlier, I compared my life to a Jenga tower. That's how adjuncting feels for a lot of us, because it's not just a patchwork of precarious gigs. Each paycheck depends to a certain extent on the others. Remove one, and the others can fall apart, too.

Academic calendars are complicated and inflexible and require a lot of advance planning. As contingent workers, we're expected to sort this out ourselves, contort our minds and schedules into wild, implausible shapes (Look, Ma, I can teach on quarters and semesters at the same time!) and to be invariably reliable and present for students -- all while silently accepting that everything can go away at any moment.

But after three years, I thought I'd just about constructed a stable enough place where I could at least say I was living paycheck to paycheck. I'd saved enough to complete some expensive dental work (I haven't had dental insurance since finishing my Ph.D.) and to catch my breath long enough to start planning a way out of the adjunct trap. For me, "stable" would mean teaching six classes a year at two institutions and earning a small stipend to work about 15 hours a week for the public university's adjunct union.

Does this sound like a lot? I'm not sure, because in the 2016-17 school year, I taught eight classes while also doing union work, co-creating an online magazine that we hope to grow into an educational nonprofit and filling in my income gaps with freelance editing. So if you think adjuncts are in this position because we don't put in the hours -- I guess I'm tired -- all I can think of in response are swears.

Back to that Jenga tower. Let me break down how it was constructed:

Job 1: Teaching film studies at a large, urban, public university ("Public U").

After roaming the country collecting advanced degrees for 10 years, I returned to my home state. I was excited to teach at the institution that had enabled me -- a smart kid from a small town, whose parents had no money to contribute to tuition -- to finish her college education. I wanted to work with lower-income, first-generation and nontraditional students, and I wasn't disappointed. Public U students are just as great as I thought they'd be.

Job 2: Serving as vice president of membership for the adjunct union.

It's not much money, but it's meaningful work. It also provides the luxury of colleagues. Adjuncting is lonely.

Job 3: Teaching visual culture at a small, private art college ("Private College").

This gig pays less than the public university, but a) it fills the money gap the other two jobs don't meet and b) I just like teaching there. The students are curious, open and fun. And the level of collegiality is leaps and bounds ahead of my public university experience. I can imagine continuing there even after I find a more reliable income source, because -- and this is important -- I love working with college students. And I'm good at it.

So when I had time to think about that "Budget Cuts" email, it felt like a chain of mini panic attacks. Public U is my biggest paycheck. Also the union bargained for a health fund that offsets the cost of my individual health insurance premium, which means I'm losing an additional $700 a term. And is my union position dependent on my teaching at Public U?

Also, because I'd already been promised three classes at Public U, I'd turned down classes at Private College, so now I only had one course lined up for fall. And my rent was going up. Like, a lot. And given all the "repeal and replace" B.S. about our nation's health care, the *best case* scenario is that my already too-expensive premium will go up again next year. On top of that, teaching at two institutions made me eligible for public service student-loan forgiveness because I could verify that the total was more than 30 hours per week. (There's actually no set

rule for how to count adjunct hours, but ACA guidelines use one and a quarter hours' prep time for every hour taught. Union workers aren't eligible for this program, so even though I work more than full-time, teaching at one institution means I'm not eligible anymore. And anyway, the whole program is on the chopping block. The tower weebled and wobbled.

After some scrambling, Private College offered me a second class. And I learned I could continue working for the union, but possibly in a different capacity. It's less money than I was planning on, but I'll be OK. As long as absolutely nothing else goes wrong, the tower won't fall. Yet. But it could.

As an organizer for Public U's adjunct union, I know that my story is not uncommon. Almost half the faculty members at Public U are adjuncts. Last year, we taught slightly more student credit hours than tenure-track faculty. Next year, by design, we'll probably teach fewer. We are, in the words of one administrator, "soft money."

The myth that justifies this treatment is the same one that justifies low wages for retail and other service workers: we're newbies who need experience. (In practice, because academe makes no sense, adjuncting mostly does not help you get a full-time job. Not at the institution where you have actual experience or any other one, either.) Or we're academic housewives or retirees doing this to keep our brains busy. If you believe these things, it's no problem to trim us when the belt needs tightening.

But you can't really believe that 44 percent of your faculty won't mind when you suddenly change course because the model is less cost-effective. (Is it a coincidence that this is happening just as adjunct pay is rising and the union is getting stronger?)

In fact, in a recent survey of adjunct faculty at Public U, 57 percent of respondents said that teaching there was central to their professional identity, and 41 percent said it was secondary. Just 2 percent said it was unimportant. That means that, for most of us, this isn't just like losing a temping gig. It's losing our professional identity.

This is exactly the feeling another "budget cut" I spoke with expressed when they said, "Aside from the economics of it, losing my job is a huge loss to me -- how I think of myself, how I use my skills and creativity. It has meant I need to rethink what to do with the rest of my life, because … I love teaching." And by the way, those economics were not insignificant. Among other things, "Losing the job corresponded with my husband making a principled, though untimely, move and quitting *his* job, so I had to scramble for health insurance."

After I had time to reflect and reassemble, I came to the conclusion that what most bothered me about that email was not that it contained zero acknowledgment of my contributions to the department, or to the hardship these course cancellations would cause, or even that it was, in fact, a form letter. It turns out I received the same message as my office mate, a woman who's been teaching in the department for more than 20 years, who actually helped create the curriculum.

No, what bothered me was the subject header: “2017-2018 Budget Cuts.” As if the part of the email that should interest me was the department’s budget. As if they were saying, “Next year is going to be hard on all of us. For example, we have to fire you.” Actually, though, what the subject header says is simpler and crueler: “By ‘budget cut,’ we mean you, Sara Bernstein.”

That is why we need to stop using terms like “budget cut.” It’s the kind of empty language that obscures power. Like swapping “employee” or “worker” for “associate” and “team member.” My office mate once pointed out that there’s no such thing as a budget cut. There are only resource cuts, class cuts, people cuts. Budgets don’t hurt when they get cut. I do.