

# A Former Adjunct Looks Back

 [insidehighered.com/advice/2018/08/24/how-tenured-and-tenure-track-faculty-can-support-adjuncts-opinion](https://insidehighered.com/advice/2018/08/24/how-tenured-and-tenure-track-faculty-can-support-adjuncts-opinion)

At one point during my year spent adjuncting, a former graduate school classmate who was now a tenured professor told me that I was lucky. I didn't, he helpfully explained, have to attend department meetings, and I was only teaching one course.

Anyone familiar with adjunct life -- the anxiety about money, the constant search for the next job, the terrible work conditions -- knows that this classmate-turned-professor's comment was ignorant at best. Now, having finally landed a tenure-track professorship, I understand better the extent of his ignorance. It went beyond his obliviousness to what a \$3,000-a-semester job means.

On the surface, my colleague supported adjuncts. He believed in unionization and bemoaned the university administration's refusal to continue tenure lines upon retirement. But none of those positions -- and none of the actions he took in his role -- influenced his interactions with the adjuncts whom he worked with.

I noticed this gap between thought and action in other adjunct gigs, as well. At one job, in fact, everyone was so dissatisfied with their work environment that it seemed adjuncts existed for the purpose of complaining. Rather than being allies in a fight for, say, university resources, a culture of "punching down" prevailed. The adjunct pool was required to attend unpaid meetings, not always on teaching days, on the grounds that "everyone has it bad."

Reflecting on those experiences made me wonder: Now that I'm on the other side, what else can I do to change the structural conditions and interpersonal slights shaping adjunct life (beyond not making asinine comments to my peers)?

## **Normal at the Time**

Since starting a tenure-track job this fall, I've been considering why I wasn't able to articulate my upset to my colleague. Alison Green recently published a column on *Slate* with the subtitle "[How Bad Jobs Can Totally Warp Your Sense of What's Acceptable](#)." Adjunct jobs are much like poorly paid gig-economy jobs as a whole: ubiquitous. And while Green's column wasn't about the academy per se, some of the situations may be familiar to adjuncts: the chair or supervisor calling at all hours, harassment, poor physical conditions. And if none of those conditions was "bad enough," they become normal.

It was only when I was granted unfettered access to the supply cabinet in my current job (and saw that, indeed, our contingent faculty members were also allowed to take pens without asking) that I realized how absurd it was that my former supervisors had the cabinet under lock and key. I noticed other shifts in how I was treated, although nothing about my work had changed. I had teaching experience as an adjunct, yet professors routinely assumed that I had

never taught before. Now we discuss our teaching as peers. I published as an adjunct, yet my colleagues at those jobs assumed I wasn't done with my dissertation. Basic courtesies can be extended to adjuncts for free, and yet it seemed so normal to me at the time that I never thought to complain or ask for what I needed.

So what *can* tenured and tenure-line faculty do to support adjuncts? Based on my experiences on both sides, and as an organizer, I offer a few suggestions. I have divided them into structural and interpersonal.

Actions to encourage structural change might include the following:

- Join the union and the American Association of University Professors. Advocate for adjunct unionization and representation.
- Educate yourselves on union laws in your state and attend a protest or rally in support of local unions.
- Openly support adjunct unionization. Write (or sign) a letter of support and deliver that letter to your administration.
- Address adjunct concerns with your professional organization. Most organizations send out a member survey after the large annual conference. Might your university not subsidize adjunct travel costs? Suggest that your professional organization offer generous, multiple funds for adjuncts, not for extra professional development workshops but simply for attending the meeting. Maybe give these funds on a rolling basis so as not to create an onerous application process?
- Observe whether adjuncts have representation in your professional organization's leadership. Are adjunct concerns considered frequently and publicly or are panels about "the adjunct experience" given the last time slot?
- In department meetings, recognize, out loud, that not every department member is there. Decisions made in department meetings affect teaching-only faculty, who rarely have a voice in department culture but who may teach a majority of the students in the department -- or who may fulfill your department's service course obligations to the university.

Although actions that might change structural conditions, if successful, will offer the most long-term benefit to adjuncts (other than doing away with adjunctification as a whole, which might be the ultimate solution but seems unattainable), I would have benefited enormously from the following interpersonal ones, as well:

- Offer adjunct faculty the same physical resources as tenured and tenure-line faculty. Having a working printer, copier code and business cards is not only a way to help adjuncts feel at home in the department; such resources also make a real impact upon adjuncts' professional lives.
- Ask adjuncts about their research and teaching with the idea that they might actually teach you something. They may have published articles and books, and especially if they have worked on other campuses and you have not (or have not for a long time), they may well have a better perspective on pedagogical interventions, assessment and

course organization.

- Invite adjuncts to speak about their research. And, of course, pay them to do so (travel *and* an honorarium). Promote their work whenever possible to the faculty.
- Compensate adjuncts for their time outside the classroom. An “inviting” culture does not feel inviting when some people at the meeting are worried about how to pay for their ride home, since it will be too dark at the end of the meeting to bike.
- Punch up. Adjuncts and tenure-track faculty, especially minorities and women, have similar interests in the university structure. Humanities departments are hit by some of the same forces that keep adjuncts in subservient positions. Complaining is normal, but complain *up*, not down. Adjuncts are not your audience; they can be your allies.