

How to improve the teaching conditions of adjunct faculty members (essay)

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A Kinder Campus for Adjuncts?

Maria Shine Stewart proposes three questions for colleges to consider while reflecting on the teaching conditions of adjunct faculty members.

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By

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It was as a secretary in a busy English department at a large state university over 30 years ago that I first learned that full-time and part-time faculty occupied different worlds. Although these worlds intersected in the classroom -- and at times in my very small office -- I wondered even then if better communication and mutual recognition were possible. I saw students served by both forms of faculty. I handled instructional materials created by everyone, and I sensed the degree of commitment -- or frustration -- that both groups brought to their jobs.

From this initial vantage point, expanded by the varied roles I have had on- and off-campus since then (including full-time, nonteaching work plus over 20 years as an adjunct at multiple institutions), I would like to propose three questions for colleges to consider while reflecting on the teaching conditions of adjunct faculty members:

- Are adjunct faculty members treated like professional people?
- Are they supported in the places on campus where they work?
- Are they given things they need to do their best?

If your answers are already in the affirmative, you may not need to read on. But I urge you to anyway.

People. People, all of us, possess goals and needs and talents. And you know the line belted out by Barbra Streisand -- "People who need people are the luckiest people in the world." I still remember the shock when I first heard it. No, Barbra. If someone needs someone, and no one else is around, that is not so lucky.

Mishaps occur to everyone, regardless of job title. But if the copier is broken and no one is there to help (and an adjunct faculty member drove a long distance to prepare materials), that's not lucky. If a contingent faculty member has completed a creative project in the community (and no one on the campus cares to hear of the success), that's not lucky, either. If a student needs astute advising and administrative offices are closed (while an adjunct faculty member is teaching very late), that's not lucky.

Memos that go to some people, not all, erode communication. In my experience, when full-time faculty members join a department, only rarely are adjunct colleagues part of the welcome. And policy issues, curricula, debates, textbook decisions ... Why exclude the full teaching force?

The very adjectives -- adjunct, term, contingent -- themselves can be dispiriting. "Just an adjunct" is a sad mantra. Every human being needs to feel valued.

But let me affirm the upbeat intention of the song "People." If we are interdependent and rise to the challenge of supporting one another, it *is* an amazing feeling: "You were half, now you're whole." A spirit of camaraderie helps all of us, especially under pressure.

Recently, on one campus where I teach, an IT staffer quickly talked me through a computer program over the weekend, which was both sanity saving and in the best interest of my students. That is best practice.

Lee Kottner, social media director of [New Faculty Majority](#), suggests, "Get to know adjunct faculty members, make them visible in the rest of the department. If there's a web page or poster in the department identifying faculty, include adjuncts."

Places. Not every campus has individual offices for faculty members, but having a buffer zone around the classroom with even a degree of privacy can greatly improve pre- and postclass communication with students. When you have to rush out of a classroom before the next scheduled teacher approaches -- without any space nearby -- it can be unsettling. Campuses can incorporate spots of reflection where full- and part-time, tenured and contingent faculty members can congregate. Sharing ideas, even just smiles and nods, is not a bad thing.

Yes, cyberspace is an important place. But human contact counts. Being separated from full-time faculty can be isolating. If more visible, all faculty members can be part of transformative conversations.

One campus exiled a large group of part-time faculty to a space the size of a walk-in closet. Full-time faculty converged to express dismay and got action on the issue -- fast. That was more than kind.

A colleague in another department at my institution was a fellow adjunct for nearly two decades; we met at a gathering of a professional association though we had spent all that time one floor apart, never knowing we shared interests. One student I spoke with seemed surprised to learn that department members occupying different floors of the same building might not talk, except for awkward moments in the elevator. "Why doesn't everyone just bring a dish and have a potluck?" she asked. That was so sensible that I had to pass it on.

Things. I remember the happy surprise of sticky notes, dry-erase markers and a pen in my mailbox at one institution at the start of the term. The well-stocked supply room that I had access to as a departmental secretary decades ago is long gone, so like most people, I carry my own supplies.

In Kottner's words, "Treat adjunct faculty like you'd treat your tenured colleagues. Support them with offices, supplies, access to copiers." And then think bigger. She writes: "Help support their research, too. Make funds for conferences and travel available to adjuncts. In fact, giving adjunct faculty first crack at the funds would be a great idea to balance out pay inequity."

Joe Fruscione, a freelance editor, cofounder of [PrecariCorps](#) and former adjunct, offers further tips on professional development and job satisfaction. "Allow adjunct faculty to teach upper-level courses in their areas of expertise," he suggests. And he adds a thought germane for any adjunct who feels his or her shelf life has expired, urging campuses to provide a "meaningful path to promotion and raises -- i.e., reward experience. Don't punish it." Opening the doors to workshops, teaching awards and summer seminars to all faculty members can strengthen the entire institution.

Why bother? Herbert Freudenberger first used the word "burnout" in psychology in the mid-1970s. Christina [Maslach](#) and her colleague Michael P. Leiter later defined the antithesis of burnout as [engagement](#). I first heard the word from an adjunct faculty member when I was a secretary, surprised to hear her refer to herself that way, as she was so dedicated. In time, I learned that idealism does not inoculate one from burnout.

A good fit between the institution and those who work for it -- along with competent supervision and support -- promotes well-being. Furthermore, if people, places and things do not work together to promote a healthy workplace, it creates a domino effect. All faculty members may suffer if the talents of their peers are not fully engaged. And students respond to what faculty embody, from exhaustion to exhilaration. Positive morale is contagious.

A cynical reader might reflect that it's good to keep adjunct faculty uncertain about everything-- from available courses next semester to whether the copier will be unjammed before classes start. After all, we are in competition for scant resources. I disagree.

For three years, I was on the Modern Language Association's Committee on Contingent Labor in the Profession and learned about conditions at many colleges and universities. [A document](#), "Professional Employment Practices for Non-Tenure-Track Faculty Members: Recommendations and Evaluative Questions," is available in PDF form and written by a previous CCLIP committee. If various institutions took even a few of its questions and worked them through to constructive answers, it could transform conditions for adjunct faculty.

Although some people may still assert that adjunct labor is a given, a low priority or the rage of the future, the discussion need not stop there. It is within the power of colleges and universities to lead with better professional practices.

Bio

Maria Shine Stewart teaches writing and works as a mental health counselor. This is part of a column, A Kinder Campus, that explores human relations in the academy. It offers anecdotal and research support for the idea that when we work kinder, we work better. Workplace morale, civility and collegiality count. Goodwill is free, so stock up and spread it around. Topic suggestions are welcome. Contact mariashinestewart@gmail.com.

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