

Do Adjuncts Have Academic Freedom?

By Deidre Frontczak



One session at a recent conference on collective bargaining in higher education posed this very question. As a session panelist, I found myself exploring the matter from a number of angles I had not fully considered before. And - no surprise - I found that despite resounding affirmations from our districts, and perhaps even reassurance from our senates and unions, the real-world experience of part-time faculty in community colleges may fall far short of those aspirational goals.

What is “academic freedom”?

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) states that the principle of academic freedom “is based on the idea that the free exchange of ideas on campus is essential to good education.” In its foundational documents, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) defines three basic rights to which all college faculty should be entitled: “freedom in research and in the publication of results, freedom in the classroom in discussions of their subjects, and freedom to speak or write freely ‘as citizens, members of a profession, and officers of an educational institution’ on matters of public or institutional concern.”

These statements were designed to preserve the freedoms of a faculty formed in the full-time tenure-track model; of course, the college landscape of today looks quite different from that of 50 or 100 years ago. At most community colleges, contingent faculty are no longer an “adjunct”—connected or added to something, in an auxiliary way—but a majority of those teaching at any institution are (we are told) integral to serving our students’ needs of our students and fulfilling the mission of the college. We are critically important, they say, and valued as professionals, colleagues and equals in the shared governance of the institution. Yet, to test this collegiality, let’s pose a hypothetical scene:

Suppose next week your college president were to announce that budgetary constraints oblige her to take drastic action affecting the entire faculty, tenured and contingent alike. Effective now, she says, we are suspending all tenure, sabbaticals, and funding for professional development. And of course, no dedicated funds for scholarly research.

Suppose that in addition, healthcare and leave benefits can no longer be offered, but you are encouraged to apply for the excellent policies offered under Affordable Care Act rules in our state.

Suppose that teaching observations and evaluations by discipline peers are ended and replaced by more efficient, quantitative Student Evaluations of Teaching (SETs), conducted on a regular cycle.

Suppose mentoring programs are dissolved; departmental meetings are by invitation only; governance open to a chosen few; and from now on, Deans, Chairs, and Coordinators have sole and total discretion in assigning courses—how many, when, and which to offer—and in assigning office space for student support.

Oh, and suppose your salary is now factored on a piecework basis (service will be expected, but most often not paid). Typical class rates run between \$4,000–\$8,000 in California, but you are welcome to seek courses or consulting opportunities beyond the walls of our campus community, time and resources permitting.

What might you imagine is the impact of these changes on your academic freedom? Are you now empowered to develop innovative approaches to familiar material? To take controversial stands in the classroom, which some students might protest? To assess work honestly, knowing that – despite legislative incentives some students might fail? To speak out against abuses on campus or beyond, potentially alienating a current or future Chair? To join a political action group consistent with your professional research and expertise, possibly bringing adverse publicity to the department or campus? To fly cross-country or overseas to attend a top conference or seminar in your field?

To contingent faculty, this scenario will not seem far-fetched; for most, it is already the norm. Yet even hinting at such changes campus-wide would evoke universal outrage from

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every one of our full-time colleagues, not to mention our unions and Senate advocates, rendering such repressive changes literally unthinkable. Absurd.

Moreover, even if it were possible, from an institutional standpoint such an action would be fiscal suicide. Our professional standing would plummet. Our leverage to attract and retain good faculty would crumble. The perceived value of our degrees would tank. Students would find other options – not only because of the obvious disregard for student-faculty connections, but for the sheer injustice of subjecting an entire community of learners whose lives are devoted to exploring and sharing a treasured discipline, to the stark and simplistic rules of a market economy.

But, if that is the case—and if these are precisely the conditions under which three-fourths of our faculty are now employed—where are the voices of outrage? Where is the solidarity behind colleagues whose degrees, publications and experience are in many, perhaps most, cases equivalent to those of their full-time peers? Where are the demands for job security, professional growth, benefits and pay parity for contingent faculty who have often spent years or decades within the same campus walls? Why are all of us faculty—contingent instructors, as well as those who occupy more privileged ranks— not raising the alarm about the drastic impact that a two-tiered faculty system must have on the life and future of the college as a whole?

Perhaps perceptions about contingent faculty, and the conditions in which they labor, have not yet caught up to the facts. So, let’s look at a few statistics:

» Currently, between 60–75 percent of college faculty members are part-time. A congressional report, *The Just In Time Professor*, estimated in 2014 that there were over 1 million contingent faculty in the U.S.; five years later, that number has only grown. In almost all cases, contingent faculty labor largely funds the salaries of both administrators and tenured/tenure track colleagues; yet they receive significantly lower comparative pay for

similar work, limited or no access to benefits, and apathy or worse from many of their colleagues.

- » Colleges point to tightening budgets and competing demands as constraints on full-time hiring. But between 1976–2011 *Inside Higher Ed* (Flaherty, 2014) reported that the ranks of senior administrators grew by 141 percent, and of full-time tenure-track faculty by just 23 percent. In that same period, part-time positions increased by 286 percent and full-time faculty by 259 percent. Current data from community colleges suggests that those gaps have only widened since then.
- » Contingent, part-time faculty are often viewed either as young scholars beginning a rising career—or non-academic professionals employed in another field, teaching occasional classes. But Kerry Danner of Georgetown University reports that 70 percent of contingent faculty are over 40, with 30 percent aged 55–69. About half teach one or two courses at a single institution, but 22 percent teach three or more classes at multiple institutions. About 50 percent say they would strongly prefer full-time, permanent work. Another 10 percent say they would prefer full-time but non-permanent assignments.

And when full-time faculty positions do open these are rarely offered to an adjunct with a proven track record in that department. In fact, Hank Reichman of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) reports that the longer an adjunct serves in that role, the less likely he or she is to be perceived as a serious colleague and hired into a tenure-track position, with women significantly less likely than men to transition into tenure-track roles.

So once again, with a majority of our faculty holding little or no job security, with “success” often defined in questionable, market-based terms... can these working conditions possibly foster collegiality, openness, and professional dignity and advancement for all faculty? And without such assurance, can we possibly affirm that our contingent colleagues enjoy true academic freedom?

Commodification of Higher Education

We all understand that the economic forces affecting higher education present a complex challenge with rising demands on limited fiscal reserves. In response, it is tempting for colleges to shift to a business model, where the gig economy and just-in-time hiring (and firing) are a practical way to maximize resources and minimize costs. But how well does this model really function in the wider economic world?

Yes, gig workers are cheaper. They do not get paid vacations and they cover their own healthcare. They do not share in advancement incentives and when budgets contract they are the first to go. We lament the resulting wage gap observed in business nationwide, but fail to recognize the impact of this inequality in our own lives, for tenured and contingent faculty alike.

Apart from fostering internal competition, an underclass of “just in time” faculty discourages such workers from knowing, much less exercising, their full freedoms and rights. Meanwhile, a growing pool of at-will workers encourages legislators and districts to chip away at the freedoms tenured faculty have long taken for granted. In essence, faculty in this market economy have transformed gone from a community of self-governing, collegial scholars to a collection of rival entrepreneurs.

So, if “academic freedom” implies freedom of teaching and research, freedom for outside speech and action, plus economic security to guarantee those rights, it seems clear that adjunct employment threatens that entire academic model. But perhaps we are starting with the wrong question. Perhaps the question we must now ask is whether higher education is indeed just one more industry in service of the wider economy, with courses as our business product, and students employed in “good-paying” jobs as the primary strategic goal? The business model prizes efficiency and outputs. If this is indeed our purpose then perhaps we should rethink the value of academic freedom, as a free and authentic exchange of ideas may in fact be just an encumbrance to that economic end.

Every community college, by virtue of its public status and mission, aims to strengthen knowledge and shared values and to serve as a force for positive societal change. In an article entitled *Saying No to an Economy that Kills* (2019), Professor Kerry Danner of Georgetown argues that by buying into this model – by outsourcing staff, creating a two-tiered

system, offering low-paying and unstable work for the many to sustain relative comforts (but greater pressures) for a fortunate few, our colleges undermine not only their own mission but their credibility as a force for social justice and moral standards within the wider community. If so, we cannot be surprised when public support for faculty erodes, and the demand for sustainable budgets for higher education fades away. Perhaps, if this trend continues, will we have no one but ourselves to blame. ■

