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ABSTRACT

At many higher education institutions, there is increasing reliance on the services of part-time, instead of full-time, faculty. This article presents critical information on the ethics of employing these adjunct faculty, a trend that is especially prominent in community colleges. The paper's introduction discusses adjunct wages, working conditions, hiring agreements, and benefits. Section 2 presents ethical objections to the use of adjuncts, with subsections that set the stage for more specific arguments, coached in economic terms, against the policy of adjunct employment. Section 3 suggests a limited use of adjuncts that might be acceptable, and section 4 considers other issues concerning the use of adjuncts, such as cost implications, effects of eliminating adjuncts on the tuition structure, effects of heavy reliance upon adjuncts, and the governance implications of a large adjunct teaching force. (AS)

On the Ethics of Employing Adjunct Faculty

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"On the Ethics of Employing Adjunct Faculty"

[An article solicited by Phyllis Woloshin-Lerman for
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by
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1.0. Introduction. There is increasing reliance on part-time teaching staff, often called "adjuncts," in lieu of hiring full-time faculty at many higher education institutions. The trend is pronounced in community colleges. It was so in Illinois where I taught as an adjunct for over two decades. Two years' residence in Ohio suggest a similar pattern. Discussion with colleagues in the American Philosophical Association (APA) and the American Association of Philosophy Teachers (AAPT) further confirms the impression.[1]

Furthermore, the numbers of adjunct faculty, and the numbers of students taught by adjuncts, seem significant. Writing in the *Chronicle of Higher Education,* Eugene Arden (then Vice-chancellor of the University of Michigan at Dearborn) estimated that up to 40% of all college teaching was done (in 1989) by adjuncts. Thus, a student taking five 3-credit hour courses could expect that two out of five instructors would be adjuncts and not members of the academic departments offering the courses.[2]

Typically, adjuncts are hired to teach on a "per course" basis, with no continued employment relationship implied or reasonably expected beyond

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1 A workshop on this and related issues was delivered by me at the 9th Workshop / Conference of the AAPT in August 1992 at the University of Vermont, Burlington, VT.

2 Eugene Arden, "Point of View: How to Help Adjunct Professors, Academe's Invisible People." *The Chronicle of Higher Education,* May 17, 1989, page A48.

those course(s).[3] Hiring agreements are usually verbal. Sometimes the person hired will have less in the way of experience and credentials than others teaching on a full-time basis (tenured or tenure-track). Hiring is often at the last minute following administrative judgment that enrollments warrant opening additional classes. Unexpected drops in enrollment can lead to administrative cancellation of the agreement, sometimes during the opening days of a school term, and often without any remuneration for the adjunct's work of preparation.

Working conditions seem to vary, but a few generalizations might be made. The chief obligation of the adjunct is to offer classes which "count," both intellectually and in terms of a student's grade point average, like other classes in the curriculum. Subject matter taught, level of instruction (introductory or advanced), even the time of class meeting, are usually at the choice of the department head, not the adjunct. Adjuncts are generally required to post and keep office hours for students, but adjuncts usually have no other substantive responsibilities. In larger settings, where less attention is paid to individuals, the new adjunct is given little or no introduction to institutional culture; it's "sink or swim."

Adjunct teacher wages are generally much below those of full-time faculty considered pro rata. Compensation seldom includes health or other benefits. Adjunct teachers are seldom covered by union contracts or other collective bargaining agreements. (I have seen a collective bargaining agreement in Illinois which includes adjuncts teaching two or more courses for some consecutive academic terms.) Adjuncts are often invited to Autumn greeting festivals sponsored by college administrators. Sometimes adjuncts are invited to faculty meetings. However, I know of no cases where adjuncts have department voting rights on substantive issues.

Adjuncts enjoy few if any of the scholarly benefits enjoyed by full time faculty, such as sabbatical leaves, research initiation support, book publication subventions or support of travel expenses to go to professional conferences.

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3 There has been recognition in the press recently of teaching assistants, for instance those at Yale University, who have engaged in a form of strike hoping to gain recognition as employees. For present purposes, I refrain from judging whether teaching assistants and adjuncts are in similar or different situations. The present remarks concern only adjuncts.

Last, and stated last for emphasis, I know of no provisions which extend the very important concept of academic freedom to the expressions of adjunct faculty; but I have no doubt of the chilling and degrading effect that follows from such vulnerability.

I have over two decades' experience as an adjunct teacher. This has allowed observation of many institutions where adjuncts are a mainstay of the teaching force. I have come to believe that heavy reliance on adjuncts generates conflicts of varying kind (economic, educational, moral) and intensity among teachers, students and administrators. Given the theme of this issue of *New Directions for Community Colleges,* my purpose is to draw out some of the ethical implications of the practice.

I have experienced adjunct employment as abusive, and I acknowledge a deeply felt aversion to the adjunct status.[4] I make no apologies for these feelings. However, the purpose of the present essay is not to vent feelings (though I must continually monitor them, lest they contaminate my thinking). Rather, I will present in section 2 some ethical reasons for objecting to the use of adjuncts described above. Section 3 will suggest a limited use of adjuncts which might be acceptable. And section 4 will close the essay by acknowledging, but not resolving, some issues which go beyond the scope of this essay.

2. Ethical Objections to the Use of Adjuncts. I believe that a policy of heavy reliance on adjunct teaching staff is unacceptable because it is unfair to the adjunct. To help state the argument I need first to set the stage (2.1.); then I will state a specific argument, couched in economic terms, against the policy (2.2.); and finally, I will suggest a generalization of the argument intended to make it of wider interest and application (2.3.).

2.1. Degrees Awarded to Undergraduates Signal Economic Value Added. I start by repeating a perception that has become commonplace in discussion of educational issues. Students say they pursue post-secondary

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4 Compared with adjunct employment, my present employment as a tenure track Assistant Professor, University College, University of Cincinnati, feels -- after two decades of job search -- like I've "died and gone to heaven."

education because the degree will, directly or eventually, be an advantage in the job market. To be sure, we all speak of other ideals, literacy, critical thinking and so forth. But the students I talk with regularly are quite clear that they are in school to prepare for a job, and hopefully a better job which will make the educational investment "pay off."

The mechanisms at work here are not hard to imagine. The academic degree brings advantage in the labor market because employers generally rely on it as a prediction that the job applicant holding a degree will perform with greater competence than the applicant without a degree. Some employers even rely on an academic degree as a prediction that the applicant will be better able to learn new job skills, including skills not taught while the applicant was earning the degree. In short, an academic degree adds to the economic value of the degree holder in most job markets.

The view that an academic degree adds economic value is reinforced by the promotional literature published by college admissions offices. It can be confirmed by asking students why they are enrolled in college, or by asking parents (or other tuition payers) why they pay the bills, or by asking corporate employment officers why they include specific earned degrees as "minimum" qualifications in job notices.[5]

Whatever else American undergraduate institutions do, they function significantly as certification agencies for the jobs available in the economy. Whether state supported or independent, these not-for-profit organizations issue certifications of competence in exchange chiefly for tuition income. This occurs in a market setting no less commercial or competitive than that inhabited by for-profit organizations like Chiquita Brands of North America, AT & T or Archer Daniels Midland. There are complex ways of expressing the economic value added by award of an academic certificate. There is competition among degree granters to attract more, sometimes better

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5 The link between educational certification and employability has become a piece of common sense in American culture. I wish to acknowledge the contribution of Arthur L. Stinchcombe, John Evans Professor of Sociology at Northwestern University, in refining this insight. I have benefitted from his paper "The University as a Business Institution (Reading Version)," delivered April 24, 1990; however, his focus of attention is the "research institution," while my present focus is the rather different community college.

qualified, degree applicants. And there are complicated ways in which payments are made for those certifications, ways which affect not only the finances of individual families but governmental policy and whole sectors of the economy. The overall process of exchange has tremendous consequences for the quality of social life experienced by those active in the educational market place.[6]

One more area of the picture needs to be drawn. So far we have focused primarily on the student and the employment value signaled by the degree or certificate awarded. But the certificate was awarded, presumably, after a course of instruction and after some form of examination which demonstrated that the student-candidate was worthy of certification. This is, economically speaking, the job of the faculty. Faculty members deliver instruction to students; they test to insure that skills or understanding have been implanted; and they are the ultimate certifiers of student competence. For their role in the institutional mission they receive an economic reward. This reward comes in several forms, including a share of tuition and other institutional income, benefits, such as health insurance, having considerable monetary value, and certain other arrangements concerning working conditions, job security and so forth. The matter of faculty rewards will play an important role in the argument of section 2.2.

Some readers will approve of the above description of "the higher learning," and some will not. Some discussants have found my description accurate concerning the way things are and the way they ought to be; and some discussants have found my description crude, materialistic and "unworthy of a philosopher." Whatever the reader's reaction, it must be understood that I have attempted only to describe what goes on in college.

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6 Seeing the activity of education institutions as a business is, perhaps, helpful to understanding why we see an increased reliance on adjunct teaching staff. If labor costs, especially costs of benefits, etc., can be controlled by "down-sizing" the full-time faculty, then the institution can function more efficiently. Use of adjuncts has this cost-cutting effect. Presumably, this pleases boards of trustees (who are often from the business sector) as well as tax-conscious legislators. However, it goes beyond the scope of this essay to prove that this is, or is not, the case.

But what I have described is different from my aspiration for undergraduate education.

2.2. Equal Value Added by Instructors Should Bring Equal Reward. The stage is now largely set. The major point of my argument will be clearer if the reader will focus attention on the role and rewards of the faculty in the economic process described above.

Let us ask whether the value added to the educational experience by the adjunct is more than, less than or equal to that added by the full-time (tenured or tenure-track) faculty member. Specifically, is the nature of the job done by the adjunct any less valuable to the student than that done by the full-time faculty member? *Mutatis mutandis* this is the question whether the adjunct is as valuable to the institution in fulfilling its obligations to its constituencies as the full-time faculty.

The answer seems clear: the job done by an adjunct is as important as the job done by a full-time faculty member. If it is important for students to learn what is taught in English 201, this importance is not changed by whether the course is taught by Professor Jones or Ms. Smith, an Adjunct. Rather, we say that English, or whatever subject, is important to the student for reasons intrinsic to the subject matter. To be sure, we may judge that Smith or Jones accomplishes the job well or poorly. But note that we judge better or poorer instruction in significant degree by reference to the intrinsic importance of the subject matter.

But the claim that adjuncts and full-time faculty do jobs of equal importance is in stark contrast to the facts of institutional reward. A different tale is told by comparing the terms of employment of any full-time faculty member and those of any adjunct. To see this, recall the terms of employment for adjuncts laid out in the opening paragraphs of this essay. No full-time faculty member would accept such terms. A reader who doubts this is urged to consult with a full-time faculty member, or with anyone involved with negotiating a collective bargaining agreement.

To put the matter a little differently, if the subject matter taught is intrinsically important, then the (economic) value added is the same no matter who teaches it. This would predict equal reward for whoever teaches

the subject matter. But the facts are to the contrary. This arouses the suspicion that adjuncts are rewarded in a most unfair way.

But perhaps there is a way out of this seeming difficulty. Let us maintain that the subject matter taught by the adjunct is just as important as that taught by the full-time faculty. Might we explain different institutional rewards on the ground that the full-time faculty perform the job better? Prof. Jones, it might be argued, is experienced, has the Ph.D., has published in refereed journals, and so forth. Such considerations mean that students in Prof. Jones' section of English 201 will be better instructed than those in the section taught by Mr. Edwards, another Adjunct. And this difference in quality of instruction is reflected in different compensation. The situation here would be something like "paying a higher price for premium gasoline," as one colleague puts it.

But this story doesn't work. First, there is a common experience that many adjuncts are every bit as qualified as Prof. Jones. They have the Ph.D. or other appropriate degree; they have much experience; their survival in the market is often the result of enthusiasm which outshines that of full-time faculty. Yet their degrees, experience, enthusiasm and accomplishments are not recognized in the institution's reward of their contribution. Second, if it is insisted (notwithstanding the first consideration) that performance of adjuncts is indeed lower in quality than that of full-time faculty, then where is the evidence? I know of no institution that has sought to establish performance comparisons between the two groups in order to justify pay differentials.

Additional to the two problems just mentioned, I have found educators reluctant to discuss the idea that adjuncts are rewarded less because their performance does not match up to that of the full-time faculty. The reluctance is well founded. It would be most embarrassing to suggest to students or other tuition payers that adjuncts give inferior quality instruction (like a lower grade of gasoline). In fact, even a hint of this idea might launch charges of fraud which could have very uncomfortable legal implications. (Of course, the adjuncts themselves have little doubt that they are regarded as inferior; everything about their terms of employment -- except the Dean's warm assurances every Fall -- tells them they are so regarded.)

And so, we arrive at a problem. The adjunct is held to perform a service that is inherently no less valuable than that performed by the full-time faculty member. Yet the adjunct's reward is in no way equal to that of the full faculty member, even when considered pro rata. Moreover, the presumption is that adjunct teachers perform their duties with no generic difference of quality from full faculty. Yet the equality of the adjunct's contribution is not reflected in rewards. In short, equal contribution is not equally compensated. This is unfair. It is unjust. Some full faculty, some Deans, and even some Board of Trustee members blush when confronted with the situation. But it is increasingly the case.

2.3. A Generalization of the Argument. My argument may be summarized thus:

Premise 1: Fairness demands that persons making contributions of equal value to an economic process be rewarded equally in economic terms, or that unequal reward for equal contribution is unfair;

Premise 2: Adjuncts and full faculty make contributions of equal value to the economic process which culminates in the certification of student competence;

Premise 3: Adjuncts are not rewarded equally in economic terms with full faculty;

Conclusion: Adjuncts are treated unfairly.

I have put the matter in an economic context because the issue appears in economic form, and because these are the terms most familiar to persons who regularly discuss such matters, namely, faculty, students, adjuncts and administrators. But some readers will not be happy with this economic terminology because, they believe, the kinds of value passed on to students in the educational process include more than economic value. Such readers might argue that a student is not just a material product which emerges from a production line worth a little more on the market after being processed. I agree with this view. So I want now to suggest a widening of perspective.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to indicate all that might be included under the heading "the value of an education." But a few bold strokes may indicate our aspirations. We hope that our students emerge from college more literate than when they entered, more appreciative of their human and cultural surroundings, better able to think on their own, to think imaginatively, to think and act compassionately, to think critically, better

equipped with specific intellectual tools to solve problems, better able to work individually or in a team effort. We want this and much more.

But whatever our aspirations for educational outcome, the faculty (full-time or adjunct) is explicitly charged with the responsibility for instruction. This is true regardless of the kind of value realized immediately by the student or realized in the long run by the society. To be sure, it is not only the faculty's instruction which makes the graduated student is a better citizen, a better employee, a more sensitive person and so on. But the faculty is responsible for sparing no reasonable effort in bringing about the desired enrichments of students. This is no small responsibility. It is one way to state the central responsibility of undergraduate education.

In this larger setting, just as in the narrower economic setting, fairness requires that equal contributions toward realizing valued educational goals should be equally rewarded. Whether the nature of the reward is salary, health benefits, office space, institutional recognition, sabbatical leave, academic freedom, tenure, research initiation support, or whatever, equal contributions ought to bring equal rewards.

The alternative choices are: 1-an arbitrary and unfair reward system, or 2-a reward system which does not match our stated principles of educational value. Neither of these alternatives is acceptable. The first is not a lesson we should give, if we pretend to democracy. And the second is not a lesson we should give, if we claim to value truthfulness.

The unfairness of adjunct employment is clearly visible in the economic context, but the unfairness is not limited to the economic context. We may think of the economic context as a microcosm for a larger context of educational value. In the larger context of cultural enrichment, the educational contributions of adjunct instructors deserve a reward equal to the reward of the full-time faculty.

3. **A Limited Use of Adjuncts that Might be Acceptable.** A reader might ask whether my position implies the abolition of adjunct positions. In general, it does. If we reward adjuncts and full faculty equally for equal contributions, there would be no reason for classifying them differently. And that is how I think it should be, for the most part.

But there may still be instances where we could fairly reward a person giving instruction differently than we reward our full-time faculty. I have in mind the sorts of instances which may have given rise to the idea of "adjunct" faculty in the first place. Let me illustrate by example.

It may be appropriate to employ adjuncts to provide some narrow piece of expertise which is useful but not essential to a course of instruction. For example, students studying accounting are surely helped by knowing how to use a computerized statistical program. A computer expert is reasonably brought in to teach the use of the program. The contribution is indeed useful, and should command whatever the market for such services currently indicates. But the responsibilities of an adjunct in this situation are nowhere near those of the faculty member responsible for the overall design and delivery of the course. And the relationship between adjunct and student is nothing like the relation between full-time faculty and student. There are many ways in which this is not an equal contribution; hence, it does not call for equal rewards.

I am sure there are other examples. Since most accounting faculty probably know and can teach the statistical program, perhaps the adjunct could usefully teach computer trouble-shooting. Or a philosopher could be imported for a one-time lecture on business ethics (perhaps a lecture on equal compensation). These contributions are truly "adjunct" to the contribution of the full-time faculty member. We would be justified in rewarding them differently. But in no case have we given a rationale for the use of these adjuncts as a cheap substitute for the contributions provided by the full-time (tenure and tenure-track) faculty.

4.0. <u>Other Issues Concerning the Use of Adjuncts</u>. Considerations up to this point have focused solely on whether or not adjunct status is fair to adjuncts. I realize, however, that fairness to adjuncts is not the only issue involved. It has been enlightening to see what a wide range of interconnected problems is brought up by discussion of adjuncts. But I am convinced that none of these issues changes the basic unfairness of the adjunct teaching arrangement as it is widely practiced.

Generally, the associated questions have to do with the effects or consequences of the adjunct teaching system as it has grown up. (By contrast,

the foregoing considerations concerned the intrinsic demerits of the adjunct teaching system, largely apart from its consequences.) What are some of the problematic effects which may attach to the heavy use of adjuncts?

1. The cost implications are surely important. It is an interesting exercise to calculate what the costs of education would be, if all students were taught by full-time faculty. Now subtract from this the cost of education under the current system of heavy reliance on adjuncts. Every such estimate I have seen leaves a large positive remainder. These are funds which would "break the bank" for a financially stressed institution; or they are funds which can be diverted to other purposes for a financially well endowed institution. But in any case, they are funds which represent a different picture from that which holds under a system that uses adjuncts heavily.

2. A particularly important variation on the above exercise is to calculate the effect of eliminating adjuncts on the tuition structure. The effect will be different for different institutions depending on their financial health and how they would choose to use any surplus. But it is not difficult to imagine a revised tuition structure that would "break the bank" of many students or their families. Even if adjunct employment were eliminated, and tuitions remained the same, it likely that other drastic changes would appear in the budget and hence in the complexion of the institution.

3. But what of the educational effects of heavy reliance upon adjuncts? There are stories which confirm the best and the worst possibilities. Some anecdotes show adjuncts to be overworked, over stressed, generally desperate and the poorest placed persons to pass on what is worthwhile about their disciplines. And some anecdotes describe adjuncts as souls liberated from compromise by a stultifying tenure system, able therefore to catch student imaginations and inspire excellent work. What would happen if adjuncts were eliminated depends on which picture is really the case.

4. I hope that administrators and Boards of Trustees think about the governance implications of a large adjunct teaching force as much as some faculty do. A smaller full-time professoriate may seem easier for administrators or Boards of Trustees to deal with. But a large group of adjuncts having no genuine citizenship in the institution may not be easy to

deal with. Feeling put upon, with no real voice and a diminishing amount to loose, adjuncts may pose a challenge to smooth operation.

By now the reader may sense the scope of issues that surround the use of adjuncts. More could be added to the four listed above. I am certain that I would not have sufficient factual data to make useful judgments on these issues if it were my job.

But finally, I can see no reasons arising from these last considerations to change my assessment of the ethics of employing adjuncts. I would appreciate hearing from persons who see the matter differently. But as it is widely practiced, the use of adjuncts seems to me unfair and unjust. And there I rest my case.

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