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Despite Heavy Reliance on Part-Time Faculty Members, Colleges and Universities Fail to Support Them Adequately

New report documents low pay, little opportunity for advancement

As of 2009, 75.5% of instructional staff members were employed in contingent positions either as part-time or adjunct faculty members, full-time non-tenure-track faculty members, or graduate student teaching assistants. Despite the majority status of the contingent academic workforce, systematic data on their working conditions is minimal, especially since the discontinuation in 2003 of the United States Department of Education's National Study of Postsecondary Faculty.

In an effort to address this lack of data, the Coalition on the Academic Workforce (CAW) conducted a large survey of contingent faculty members and instructors in fall 2010. The survey received close to 30,000 responses, with just over 20,000 coming from individuals who identified themselves as working in a contingent position in at least one institution of higher education in that term.

In a report released on 20 June 2012, CAW provides initial findings from the survey, focusing specifically on part-time faculty members, the largest group of survey respondents, and reporting on demographics, working conditions, and course-level data.

Key Findings

Several key indicators stand out that show how heavily colleges and universities are relying on part-time faculty members without supporting them adequately.

- The median pay per course, standardized to a three-credit course, was $2,700 in fall 2010 and ranged in the aggregate from a low of $2,235 at two-year colleges to a high of $3,400 at four-year doctoral or research universities. While compensation levels varied by type of institution, part-time faculty respondents report low compensation rates per course across all institutional categories.

- Part-time faculty respondents saw little, if any, wage premium based on their credentials. Their compensation lags behind professionals in other fields with similar credentials, and they experienced little in the way of a career ladder (such as higher wages after several years of work).

- Professional support for part-time faculty members' work outside the classroom and inclusion in academic decision making was minimal.

- Part-time teaching is not necessarily temporary employment, and those teaching part-time do not necessarily prefer a part-time to a full-time position. Over 80% of respondents reported teaching part-time for more than three years, and over half for more than six years. Furthermore, over three-quarters of respondents said they have sought, are now seeking, or will be seeking a full-time tenure-track position, and nearly three-quarters said they would definitely or probably accept a full-time tenure-track position at the institution at which they were currently teaching if such a position were offered.

- Course loads varied significantly among respondents. Slightly more than half taught one course or two courses during the fall 2010 term, while slightly fewer than half taught three or more courses.

Methodology

The survey was open to any faculty member or instructor who wished to complete a questionnaire; it is therefore not a strictly representative sample of faculty members working in contingent positions. Nevertheless, the response provides the basis for a detailed portrait of the work patterns, remuneration, and employment conditions for what is now the largest and what has long been the fastest-growing part of the academic workforce. Faculty members in part-time positions were the largest group of respondents to the CAW survey, providing 10,331 of the 19,850 valid responses by contingent faculty members and instructors who were teaching at least one course in fall 2010. In addition to gathering information about their academic background and other personal characteristics, the survey asked part-time faculty respondents to provide data for each course they taught—a total of 19,615 courses.

The coalition will also be making the data set available to qualified academic researchers for further analysis. To read the full report, please visit www.academicworkforce.org.

The Coalition on the Academic Workforce (CAW) is a group of higher education associations, disciplinary associations, and faculty organizations committed to working on the issues associated with deteriorating faculty working conditions and their effect on the success of college and university students in the United States. CAW works to collect, analyze, and disseminate information on the use and treatment of faculty members serving full- and part-time off the tenure track and to promote conditions by which all faculty members can strengthen their teaching and scholarship, better serve their students, and advance their professional careers. To learn more about CAW and to see a full list of members, please visit www.academicworkforce.org.

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The Big Lie About the 'Life of the Mind'

By Thomas H. Benton

A year ago, I wrote a column called "Graduate School in the Humanities: Just Don't Go," advising students that grad school is a bad idea unless they have no need to earn a living for themselves or anyone else, they are rich or connected (or partnered with someone who is), or they are earning a credential for a job they already hold.

In a March 2009 follow-up essay, I removed the category of people who are fortunately partnered because, as many readers wrote in to tell me, graduate school and the "two-body problem" often breaks up many seemingly stable relationships. You can't assume any partnership will withstand the strains of entry into the academic life.

Those columns won renewed attention last month from multiple Web sites, and have since attracted a lot of mail and online commentary. The responses tended to split into two categories: One said that I was overemphasizing the pragmatic aspects of graduate school at the expense of the "life of the mind" for its own sake. The other set of responses, and by far the more numerous, were from graduate students and adjuncts asking why no one had told them that their job prospects were so poor and wondering what they should do now.

I detected more than a little sanctimony and denial in most of the comments from the first group and a great deal of pain and disillusionment in the latter. The former seem used to being applauded by authorities; the latter seem to expect to be slapped down for raising questions. That's why they write to me, I believe. They want confirmation that something is wrong with higher education, that they have been lied to, systematically.

Some people have mistaken my position that graduate school in the humanities is fine for the rich and connected for the view that that's how it should be, as if I am some kind of smug elitist. It often happens that readers—looking only at an excerpt from a column—mistake practical advice about coping with a harsh reality for an affirmation of that reality, instead of a criticism of it.

One reason that graduate school is for the already privileged is that it is structurally dependent on people who are neither privileged nor connected. Wealthy students are not trapped by the system; they can take what they want from it, not feel pressured, and walk away at any point with minimal consequences. They do not have to obsess about whether some professor really likes them. If they are determined to become academics, they can select universities on the basis of reputation rather than money. They can focus on research rather than scrambling for time-consuming teaching and research assistantships to help pay the bills. And, when they go on the market, they can hold out for the perfect position rather than accepting whatever is available.

But the system over which the privileged preside does not ultimately depend on them for the daily functioning of higher education (which is now, as we all know, drifting toward a part-time, no-benefit business). The ranks of new Ph.D.'s and adjuncts these days are mainly composed of people from below the upper-middle class: people who believe from infancy that more education equals more opportunity. They see the professions as a path to security and status.

Again and again, the people who wrote to me said things like "Nobody told me" and "Now what do I do?" "Everybody keeps saying my doctorate gives me all kinds of transferable skills, but I can't get a second interview, even outside of academe." "What's wrong with me?"

The myth of the academic meritocracy powerfully affects students from families that believe in education, that may or may not have attained a few undergraduate degrees, but do not have a lot of experience with how access to the professions is controlled. Their daughter goes to graduate school, earns a doctorate in comparative literature from an Ivy League university, everyone is proud of her, and then they are shocked when she struggles for years to earn more than the minimum wage. (Meanwhile, her brother—who was never very good at school—makes a decent living fixing HVAC systems with a six-month certificate from a for-profit school near the Interstate.)

Unable even to consider that something might be wrong with higher education, mom and dad begin to think there is something wrong with their daughter, and she begins to internalize that feeling.

Everyone has told her that "there are always places for good people in academe." She begins to obsess about the possibility of some kind of fatal personal shortcoming. She goes through multiple mock interviews, and takes business classes, learning to present herself for nonacademic positions. But again and again, she is passed over in favor of undergraduates who are no different from people she has taught for years. Maybe, she wonders, there's something about me that makes me unfit for any kind of job.

This goes on for years: sleepless nights, anxiety, escalating and increasingly paralyzing self-doubt, and a host of stress-induced ailments. She has even removed the Ph.D. from her résumé, with some pain, but she lives in dread that interviewers will ask what she has been doing for the last 12 years. (All her old friends are well established by now, some with families, some with what seem to be high-powered careers. She lives in a tiny apartment and struggles to pay off her student loans.) What's left now but entry-level clerical work with her immediate supervisor just three years out of high school?

She was the best student her adviser had ever seen (or so he said); it seemed like a dream when she was admitted to a distinguished doctoral program; she worked so hard for so long; she won almost every prize; she published several essays; she became fully identified with the academic life; even distancing herself from her less educated family. For all of those reasons, she continues as an adjunct who qualifies for food stamps, increasingly isolating herself to avoid feelings of being judged. Her students have no idea that she is a prisoner of the graduate-school poverty trap. The consolations of teaching are fewer than she ever imagined.

Such people sometimes write to me about their thoughts of suicide, and I think nothing separates me from them but luck.

Scenarios like that are what irritate me about professors who still bleat on about "the life of mind." They absolve themselves of responsibility for what happens to graduate students by saying, distantly, "there are no guarantees." But that phrase suggests there's only a chance you won't get a tenure-track job, not an overwhelming improbability that you will.

Some professors tell students to go to graduate school "only if you can't imagine doing anything else." But they usually are saying that to students who have been inside an educational institution for their entire lives. They simply do not know what else is out there. They know how to navigate school, and they think they know what it is like to be a professor.

There should be a special place in hell for the professors who—at the end of an advisee's 10-year graduate program with no job in sight—say, "well, academe is not for everyone."

The main point of another column I wrote six years ago ("If You Must Go") is that students considering graduate school should "do their homework." But the problem is that there is still almost no way—apart from the rumor mill to which they do not really have access—for students to gather some of the most crucial information about graduate programs: the rate of attrition, the average amount of debt at graduation, and, most important, the placement of graduates (differentiating between adjunct, lecturer, visiting, tenure-track positions, and nonacademic positions). Programs often claim that graduates who are working as adjuncts or visiting faculty members are successfully placed in the profession.

Most departments will never willingly provide that information because it is radically against their interest to do so. I can see no way for that information to become available unless it becomes part of accreditation or rankings in publications such as *U.S. News and World Report*. Perhaps departments might start offering details if students started demanding it in large numbers, with support from organizations such as the American Association of University Professors. Maybe it's possible for graduate students themselves to start gathering and reporting this information on a Web site.

Graduate school may be about the "disinterested pursuit of learning" for some privileged people. But for most of us, graduate school in the humanities is about the implicit promise of the life of a middle-class professional, about being respected, about not hating your job and wasting your life. That dream is long gone in academe for almost everyone entering it now.

If you are in one of the lucky categories that benefit from the Big Lie, you will probably continue to offer the attractions of that life to vulnerable students who are trained from birth to trust you, their teacher.

Graduate school in the humanities is a trap. It is designed that way. It is structurally based on limiting the options of students and socializing them into believing that it is shameful to abandon "the life of the mind." That's why most graduate programs resist reducing the numbers of admitted students or providing them with skills and networks that could enable them to do anything but join the ever-growing ranks of impoverished, demoralized, and damaged graduate students and adjuncts for whom most of academe denies any responsibility.

Thomas H. Benton is the pen name of William Pannapacker, an associate professor of English at Hope College, in Holland, Mich. He writes about academic culture and welcomes reader mail directed to his attention at careers@chronicle.com.