

# Renaissance of Teaching and Learning



## Part-Time Profession: Full-Time Passion

Katherine Cipriano, Department of English

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Through their experience and wisdom about learning, the writers in the Series want to open a continuous dialogue among colleagues about the always ancient, always new profession of teaching. If the Series acts as a catalyst for a new renaissance of teaching & learning at WCU, it will be serving its purpose.

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Alan Altany, Editor, *Renaissance of Teaching & Learning Booklet Series*  
and Director, Coulter Faculty Center

## Part-Time Profession, Full-Time Passion

I remember like it was yesterday.

I had successfully defended my thesis and the department head had just signed the requisite forms. I was finished! As I prepared to walk out of the room, the department head asked me to stay behind. "I don't know what your plans are, or even if you would be interested. The pay is kind of low, but we would be happy if you would teach for us in the fall." Would I?! I couldn't believe it --- a degree and a job! I didn't even look at the offered pay and asked few questions --- beyond a breathless, "Where do I sign?"

So began my career as what is now called an "adjunct." To this day, the wonder I felt then exists: I wonder, what was I thinking?

The world of the adjunct in many ways seems to be a shadow world. We coexist with full-time faculty, we teach the same students, we work at the same university, we share the same intellectual passions, yet we are often invisible and forgotten by many of our colleagues and administrators.

Part of this invisibility I feel stems from some misconceptions about adjuncts and their roles in the academic world. Over and over in the literature regarding the "adjunct problem" a refrain appears: part-timers and adjuncts are inferior members of the academic caste. They do not have the credentials of the tenured faculty. They do not research and publish; therefore they are not as scholarly as tenured faculty. They are part-time because they could not "get" a "real" job in academia as their tenured colleagues have. Losers, losers, losers.

However prevalent this perception may be, it is incorrect. Adjuncts and part-timers are individuals and the reasons for being an adjunct are as varied as these individuals. In a landmark study by Judith M. Gappa and David W. Leslie published in their book, The Invisible Faculty, the authors found that many of those who worked as adjuncts did so because they wanted to teach. In fact, for many it was their choice that they work part-time. Many of those who fill adjunct positions have full time jobs in the private business world and teach to enrich their lives and as a way to "give back" to their communities. Others choose to teach because their lives require the flexibility of a part-time position; these people are often primary caregivers, either to children or parents. Still others accept part-time positions because their partners have been offered full time positions at a university or college, but there is no full time position in their specialties. And too, you can find those who "fit" the stereotype of the adjunct who works at two or three universities or colleges, frantically commuting from one campus to the next in order to make enough money to survive.

In my department, this same variety can be seen. Most, if not all, of my fellow adjuncts share a passion for teaching; we flat out love to teach. We are excited about our classes and our students. Beyond that common passion, though, we are very different in our reasons for teaching. Some of the adjuncts in my department teach part-time so that they can pursue other interests. One of the adjuncts I worked with several years ago opted to teach part-time because she wanted to devote more time to her writing. Another one of the adjuncts taught part-time until he was able to quit teaching and devote all of his time to his glass blowing studio. Several of us, myself included, are adjuncts because we like the flexibility. We have either small children, or parents, who need extra care. Still others are teaching part-time as a way to gauge how deep their interest is in pursuing an academic career. Several of my colleagues are actively pursuing entrance into doctoral programs, while others are still deciding what they want to do when they grow up. There also are a couple of us who work part-time because our partners have full time jobs and are being supportive of their partners' goals until they are able to realize their own. And yes, there are those who work at several different institutions to make ends meet. Such distinctions, though, are largely arbitrary, as most of us have complex reasons for choosing part-time work and usually have more than one reason for making that decision.

Even though there are many reasons why a person chooses to teach part-time, there is still a perception that adjuncts are somehow inferior. I'll have to admit that I rarely think of myself as "inferior" to anyone, so it was somewhat of a surprise when I overheard a faculty member remark once that the number of part-time faculty at WCU was a "problem," and that their existence put the university at risk for accreditation. I'd never thought of myself as a "problem" before. I have always taken pride in the fact that I am a good teacher and that my students learn many invaluable skills in my class. In fact, I feel as if my students are as well taught as students who have tenured faculty. I feel this because I endured some horrendous courses in my undergraduate days, classes where the professors knew little about how to convey material in an effective manner, nor did they care. At least I cared. Therefore, I wanted to know, how could I be a problem?

At least part of the problem, according to the views of some few tenured faculty, is that I don't have a terminal degree. That is true; I don't have a terminal degree. I do, however, have a wide and varied educational background. Since I couldn't make up my mind, and since I didn't have anything better to do, I took as many courses as I could in as many areas as I could. I have bachelor's degrees in parks and recreation management and English. I have minors in criminal justice and education. That's not even including all the "extra" hours I took in biology, chemistry, nutrition, physics, and emergency medical training on the way to medical school, an ambition that couldn't

quite make it past chemistry. I may not have a terminal degree, but I have the hours for one; I'm just not sure what the specialty could be called.

What's true for me is also true for other adjuncts. They may not have terminal degrees, but they have real world experience that is invaluable in a classroom. One of my favorite professors in criminal justice often shared his experiences as a government prosecutor; his colorful and real adventures gave many of us a new interest in the dry course material. Just think of the value of having an instructor in a business course who has worked / is working as a CEO. Or the medical researcher who agrees to teach a bioethics course. Many part-timers have talent and experiences that can open brave new worlds for their fortunate students. A terminal degree is a wonderful achievement, but having one does not necessarily qualify one as a superior teacher, just as the absence of a terminal degree does not necessarily make an adjunct inferior. Besides, there are many adjuncts who do have terminal degrees in their fields.

In addition to not having terminal degrees, adjuncts are sometimes looked on as inferior scholars because they do not publish as much as their tenured counterparts. Some of this criticism is warranted --- a lot of part-time faculty do not publish. There are several reasons for this. One reason that some adjuncts choose part-time work is because they do not want to spend their time researching and publishing; they want to focus on being teachers. Another reason is the lack of time. Part-time faculty typically teach more students than tenured faculty. The heavier student loads often result from the fact that part-time faculty teach more sections in order to gain more pay. It is true too that part-time faculty often teach freshman and sophomore classes that tend to have larger enrollments than upper level and graduate courses. More students mean more paperwork.

Another constraint on the time of part-time faculty relates to their reasons for working part-time: some have full time commitments to other jobs or to family. And too, in some institutions, adjuncts are not given the necessary support or resources that allow faculty to publish. In some universities and colleges, part-time faculty are not given office space, computers, or full research privileges. Without such basic resources, research and publishing are difficult, if not impossible.

I have observed here at WCU, at least in my department, that the adjuncts do research and some even manage to be published. One of my colleagues has published haiku in some well-regarded publications for English language haiku. Several of us have presented papers at such diverse conferences as MLA, SAMLA, and the Central New York Conference on Language and Literature. And I am sure that there are many more such accomplishments of which I am unaware.

It is sad, therefore, to realize that I am not the only one, that very few in the academic community know about these accomplishments since there is little information

given to adjuncts on how to inform the university community about them. This is a fact that points out another aspect that makes research and publishing difficult for part-time faculty: there is little, if any, recognition of their accomplishments. Part-time faculty often do not know how to let others know about their research and publishing success. Some feel that the university community probably doesn't care; others simply do not have the time to figure out how to submit information to university outlets.

It is this issue of supposed, and imposed, ideas of superiority and inferiority that is at the heart of the "adjunct problem." In The Invisible Faculty, the authors discuss at length the inherent problems that result from bifurcation of university and college faculties. In a setting where the faculty ostensibly exists to teach, many of the necessary duties are performed by all faculty, whether tenured or adjunct. Therefore, when the groups are perceived as being either "superior" or "inferior," conflict and tension can exist. The "haves" often fail to recognize that their jobs are made easier by the work of the "have-nots" and the "have-nots" can begin to suspect that they are being exploited.

The feeling of being exploited seems to be universal in the world of the adjunct. Many adjuncts feel that they are not appreciated for the work and time that they invest into their "part-time" jobs. Many part-time faculty voice their dissatisfaction with the low pay, lack of benefits and often nonexistent resources (office space, computer access, and such), but what seems to draw their ire the most is the perceived lack of respect from their colleagues. Common adjunct complaints include that they are not included in department events; they are not given a voice in university governance; they are not allowed to voice opinions about curriculum, even when changes would affect them; and they are not eligible for teaching or research awards. In short, adjuncts feel as if they are looked upon as a necessary evil. The university may need them, but it doesn't have to like them.

Whether the perceived condescension is truly there or not is irrelevant. In fact, I strongly suspect that most tenured faculty would be surprised to find out that their adjunct colleagues feel this way. Nonetheless, the perception remains and is a powerful force preventing open dialogue.

Although the overall picture of the adjunct world seems bleak, there are actually many positive images. My own experience has been very different from what is portrayed in many sources as the norm for part-time faculty. When I was first hired as an adjunct, I was invited to an orientation for new faculty; there was no distinction made between me, a part-timer, and the other, tenure track hires. The orientation was thorough and informative. The atmosphere in the department where I work has always been collegial. Part-time faculty members are always included in departmental social functions and are encouraged to work on department committees. Our opinions are sought on a variety of issues, especially those that affect the way we do our jobs. We are encouraged to give our input on such topics as textbook adoption, course evaluation

techniques and curriculum changes. We are included in the annual evaluation process and are given feedback as to how effectively we are doing our jobs. We are given access to office space, to computers, and to other necessary resources. Our research and publishing efforts are encouraged and applauded. We are treated as professionals by the overwhelming majority of our colleagues.

There are, however, reminders, that we are not considered as equal to tenure track professors. We still have no voice in our own governance at the university level. And we still are not eligible for tenure or awards for teaching or research. And we still hear some muted rumblings that seem to intimate that the part-time “problem” should be eliminated by ridding the university of all part-time faculty.

In reality, though, part-time faculty should not be seen as a “problem.” Research indicates that reliance on part-time faculty will most likely increase, rather than decrease. There are those who claim that this growing reliance on adjunct faculty will negatively affect the quality of education offered at universities and colleges; however, there is no real evidence to substantiate this fear. The part-time faculty is like any other group; it is composed of individuals with different weaknesses and different strengths. Part-time faculty members bring a variety of talents and perspectives to education. And in a culture where knowledge and diversity are valued, such variety should be celebrated, not condemned.

So, what can be done to rid ourselves of this “problem”? I guess the very first step we should take is to recognize that adjuncts and part-time faculty are here to stay. In the current economic climate, reliance on part-time faculty is more likely to increase than it is to decrease. And there is more to the trend than simple economics. Our society has shifted in the way that it perceives work and job stability. I know very few people, outside of academia, who remain in the same job until retirement. Most people today recognize that they will probably not stay in the same job for thirty, twenty, or even ten years.

It can be argued that a stable faculty, one with loyalty to the institution, provides a greater quality education for its students. I agree. I think there are benefits to keeping faculty in place over a period of time, as they are better able to serve the students due to an understanding of the university that is only gained over years of service. Surprisingly enough, studies show that most adjuncts are very loyal employees; despite perceived and real inequities, many adjuncts remain at their universities for ten, twenty, and even thirty years. Adjuncts can be a stabilizing factor within a changing academic environment.

Once we have admitted that we need adjuncts, we must then figure out how to make them feel welcome. At the very least, adjuncts should be given access to the resources that enable them to perform their jobs. All adjuncts should have some place where they

can conduct office hours and meet with students. Adjuncts should have access to phones and to email, as these are also necessary for serving students. And adjuncts should also have access to photocopiers and other office supplies.

More than just enabling them to perform their jobs with the basic necessities, universities should also include adjuncts in the academic environment. The job of integrating non-tenure track faculty into an existing tenure track faculty is often left to the department head. Studies show that the attitudes and policies set by department heads set the tone for the non-tenure track faculty's experience. Therefore, department heads should be encouraged to welcome their adjuncts into their departments by making sure that they receive notices and invitations to department meetings, seminars, and social gatherings. It is perhaps a testament to our department that its non-tenure track employees have always been encouraged to act as if they were just "one of the gang."

However, the academic world exists beyond the individual departments. Adjuncts also need to be welcomed by the university at large. When the UNC Board of Governors approved the report and recommendations made by UNC's Committee on Non-Tenure Track Faculty in 2001, some of those recommendations included: considering salary increases based on service and merit; providing opportunities to non-tenure track faculty for professional development, and recognition of accomplishment through campus awards; and including non-tenure faculty in the decisions making processes at department, college, and university levels. These recommendations address many of the concerns expressed by non-tenure track faculty and carrying out the recommendations would begin the process of erasing the line of demarcation.

And it would appear that WCU has begun to move in such a direction. Salary increases have been given in certain cases; part-time faculty have access to the services of the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning; an award has been proposed that would recognize the teaching excellence of non-tenure track faculty. It has even been proposed that non-tenure track faculty be represented in university governance. It is this last proposal that shows, that despite the gains made by non-tenure track faculty, there is still more work we need to do in order to integrate fully the non-tenure track and tenure track faculty. For although the proposal has been made, it has also been shelved. At least for the time being.

It should be noted, however, that treating non-tenure track faculty as valued employees does not mean that they should be treated exactly like tenure track faculty. Equitable treatment does not mean the same treatment. It does mean, though, that policies for non-tenure track faculty should be instituted that reflect and parallel those for the tenure track faculty, especially regarding those aspects of the job that are the same such as terms of appointment, compensation, and evaluation.

The role of the adjunct is changing, as is academia. In order to meet the challenges that change always brings, it would be wise to recognize that we can best utilize the diverse and talented non-tenure track faculty we have by instituting policies that recognize them as valuable human resources. Such policies can only enhance the quality of the educational experience we offer our students.



## Bioessay

I grew up here at WCU and since it took me a long time to do so, I have a varied history of course selection. My first degree is a Bachelor of Science in parks and recreation management with a minor in criminal justice. At the time, I was flirting with the idea of being a lawyer. However, my interests are varied and I decided I wanted to try something different, so my second degree is a Bachelor of Arts in English literature with a minor in education.



Katherine Cipriano

After a year of teaching in a public high school, an experience that almost scared me out of education, I decided to return to school and pursue a master's degree. Once again, I chose English literature, mainly because I really loved it and it allowed me to pursue a variety of interests. My thesis was in medieval literature, specifically on the influence of society seen in the changes of the Arthurian legend from Bede to Morte D'Arthur. I have eclectic interests, though, and rarely remain fixed on a topic for long. I have, on my own, been studying gender issues in literature, Appalachian and Southern literature, and sports literature. Sports literature is my current interest and I have written a paper that I presented this past October to the Central New York Conference on Language and Literature and am hoping to publish sometime soon.

My greatest passion, though, is being the best classroom teacher I possibly can. I am constantly reinventing my courses, as I learn new techniques, or recognize that certain techniques will no longer work with the current population. I like to try and find new ways to make concepts more meaningful for my students, such as using Super Mario World to explain Joseph Campbell's theory regarding the heroic quest, or having them write poems about 9-11 patterned after Walt Whitman's "I Hear America Singing." I want my students to feel intellectually challenged and energized by classes and to be so interested that they forget that they are "required" courses. Some day, I hope to have every student engaged, every moment in class, and that they will remember my class as the one that gave them something new to think about.