

Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning

Responses to "The Plight of Part-Time Instructors: Two Similar Experiences," by
Linda Kinnear and Michael Waters, 11/1/97

I've been a Visiting Lecturer going on my sixth year (total), and my usual response to complaints about the way part-time folks are treated is, "you signed the contract; suck it up." While I don't feel I've been fully compensated for my work here, I do feel that I've gained a lot in the way of experience. When I sign a contract, I know what the consequences will be. Never have I approved of a two-tiered system, which I feel would simply institutionalize the second class citizenship of non-PhD teachers. Had I wanted to work permanently for a university, I would have gotten my doctorate and entered the publish or perish race. I don't want that. I want to teach freshmen and sophomores how to write and read for college, so I want to find a position at a community college. I don't believe I can be exploited here unless I allow myself to be.

There are, however, two problems which arise from these situations. The first is that students may suffer. Linda is right about the revolving door and its effects on the continuity of a program. This school advertises its commitment to teaching, but with a very few exceptions that doesn't appear to mean the teaching of freshmen and sophomores. It does seem to mean having tenured faculty who do a great job of teaching their specialty courses. Might this be a contribution to the retention problem?

The second major problem is that part-time folks are denied health care coverage. For five of the years I taught at Western, I was allowed to purchase my own insurance. This year, I am not being allowed to purchase my own health coverage. My contract for the first four classes I'm teaching states that my part-time appointment is 30% (it has been pointed out to me that even slaves were counted as 3/5 of a person); my contract for the fifth class I'm teaching states that my part-time appointment is 20%. But this doesn't add up to half-time and eligibility to purchase my own insurance. My department head attempted to help me, but neither of us was able to decipher the answer. So I had no choice but to spend almost \$600 to purchase continued coverage from my terminated policy. In 1991, I experienced a major illness, surgery, and hospitalization while I was uninsured, which, among other things, wiped out my savings and ruined my credit. I simply can't afford to gamble about whether lightning strikes twice in the same place. MLA guidelines for use of part-time faculty states that part-timers should be allowed eligibility for pay increases and benefits. But forget MLA. Part-time faculty should be given health coverage because of what it saves us all in the long run. To deny us the option of purchasing it at a reasonable cost through this university is simply unethical.

I intended to write a letter to a high-level administrator about this situation, but two other part-time folks have told me that their letters to him were ignored. I can't justify wasting my time writing a letter which will most likely be ignored. I have papers to grade and students to help. That's a valuable use of my time.

Gerri Dobbins, English

The true rewards of teaching are not monetary, for if they were, temporary faculty would not exist. The corporate culture of a university with its current monetary reward system, however, still focuses on research and publication, and only permanent faculty are compensated accordingly. Last year, my temporary teaching positions yielded an FTE of 1.08 with a part-time pay of 20% and no other benefits. If teaching were unmistakably the priority in both measure of faculty effectiveness and compensation in proportion thereof, one might conclude that some temporary faculty would be paid more than permanent faculty.

The problem of temporary faculty is part of the crisis of short-term, bottom line, lowest common denominator thinking at work today. The continued fractionalization of the faculty and increase in hostility in this short-term thinking culture is counter-productive. I believe in the search for the truth, not merely some current measurable outcome which is of little significance in the lifelong learning process. Values are too important to be left to others outside academia because intellectual learning cannot be separated from affective learning. Vicariously, though, most students are learning more about values outside of our classrooms by observing how a university operates from day to day and semester to semester.

Business and education have been inundated by the gimmickry of one-minute actions, portability of careers, total quality control of anything, and re-engineering of everything. For many, however, very little seems to make sense anymore. This lack of understanding emphasizes the complexity for and sometimes chaos of business and education, but more importantly it points to the loss of meaning in those activities by the very people who must carry them out. In my field many academics have been accused of being irrelevant to the practice of business. If nothing is done about the current crisis in universities, many academics may soon be deemed irrelevant to education.

E M Abel II, Visiting Professor, Business Law and Management

**Responses to "The Plight of Part-Time Instructors: Two Similar Experiences,"
by Linda Kinnear and Michael Waters, 11/1/97**

The plight of the most exploited segment of our faculty, part-timers, is the most egregious example of a larger problem--glaring disparities in faculty status and salaries at WCU. Kinnear suggests that we abandon the use of part-time faculty altogether and institute a two-tiered system of full-time faculty; individuals on the two tracks would be "equally valued" but presumably not equally paid. My initial response to her proposal was negative. After all, equal work for unequal pay seems inherently unfair. Hence, I dismissed Linda's idea. But, that was before I strolled over to the library and took a look at the new BD-119, which lists all of our salaries.

The truth is that we do not have to wait for Linda's two-tiered hierarchy; we already have one. Compare, for example, annual salaries of assistant professors in the Colleges of Arts and Sciences and of Business. The median salary of the 50 assistant professors in Arts and Sciences is \$36,604. In contrast, the 12 assistant professors in the College of Business have a median income of \$60,016. These disparities appear to be growing rather than shrinking. First-year faculty in some departments in the College of Business are hired at approximately twice the salary level of new faculty in some departments in Arts and Sciences.

Administrators typically claim that these differences are the inevitable result of market forces. We are competing nationally for good faculty, and, like it or not, a new Ph.D. in accounting can demand and get \$25,000 or \$30,000 a year more than one in art history. But, is this an unavoidable reality or an untested assumption? The fact is that some universities have rejected the assumption of inevitable differences. California State Polytechnical University at Pomona has recently reverted to a common salary scale across all disciplines, and they are not having trouble recruiting new faculty. Other universities, particularly those where the faculty is unionized (e.g., Bridgewater State University in Massachusetts) have also instituted systems designed to eliminate or at least reduce faculty salary inequities across disciplines. Perhaps it is time for our newly empowered senate to look at this issue as it applies to both full and part-time faculty.

Hal Herzog, Psychology

Linda Kinnear and Michael Waters present a compelling argument; WCU needs to redress inequities of part-time employment. We have been told that enrollment must go up before more money can be allocated to faculty positions. Yet according to the Chancellor's Oct. 15 memo to the faculty, freshman enrollment this term is already up, creating "our second largest class this decade." Is the burden of increased enrollment to be carried by those to whom the university has the least commitment and accords the least compensation? Almost 60% of freshman composition sections this semester are being taught by faculty classified as part-time employees; part-time faculty are teaching over 40 sections of general education English classes. The university is focusing a great deal of attention on retention of 1st and 2nd year students; we need to focus some attention on the faculty who are teaching many of those students.

One argument raised against the kind of two-tier permanent faculty proposed by Kinnear and Waters is that a two-tier system causes discontent and resentment among those in the junior tier. However, the lack of adequate pay, benefits, and professional status experienced by part-time faculty surely has already created discontent and resentment. It is time to try a new approach. A two-tiered faculty system may not be a complete and permanent solution, but it seems to be a move in the right direction towards acknowledging part-time faculty as professional colleagues whose service to the university is valuable.

Sandra Saunders, Visiting Instructor of English

It is clear that part time faculty are used as "slave labor." And it is also clear that we have dug a hole too deep to get out of without additional harm to a large number of people. The best solution is not to be so dependent on part time faculty, but we do not want to terminate employment of many of our part time faculty and we do not wish to increase our teaching loads. Correct me if I am wrong, but the problem seems to be like so many of our other problems--the regulation of part-time faculty has been to a great extent dictated to us by Raleigh.

The second issue is General Education. If we are really serious about GE and about raising the bar, then GE courses should only be taught by tenured or at least tenure-track faculty. Preferably, GE courses should be taught by the most experienced and most senior faculty members. If we are really serious about GE and about raising the bar, then the GE English should be something that we would be happy for our English majors to take, and the GE Math should be something that we would be happy for our Math majors to take, etc.

I believe that GE is very important, but it currently causes some serious problems. One of these is grade inflation. Many students are willing to take a certain number of D's and F's rather than work hard, since they have built up a cushion of A's and B's in GE courses without much effort. One solution might be to use professors with high standards to teach all GE courses on a pass/fail basis. This might seem radical, but in order to solve our retention problem we need to do something greatly different from the other schools.

Richard Stephens, Math

**Responses to "The Plight of Part-Time Instructors: Two Similar Experiences,"
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I agree with both of the opinions expressed by Linda Kinnear and Michael Waters. I think it is unfair that we don't pay our part-time instructors adequately and that they receive no benefits. I think the commitment issue is real and, frankly, I am impressed with the job that they are doing, considering the way they are treated. If we can improve their status (salaries, benefits), it will undoubtedly make our raises smaller, and they haven't been all that good for the past 5 years or more. What is really needed here is a system modification from the top down--and not only here at WCU but in all of our institutions.

anonymous

The comments of the two faculty forum pieces are right on the money (no pun intended). While in dire emergencies, the use of part-time faculty might be necessary, it is unconscionable that WCU has developed a "full stable" of these over-worked, underpaid part-time faculty. It is particularly galling to note that, in opposition to the classic "American Dream," these people have no (or very few) opportunities to obtain full-time status and get into tenure-track positions.

The rise of part-time work at low salaries and with no benefits or job security is one of the most frightening manifestations of the present economy. Full-time faculty who think themselves secure in their jobs and thus are unable to empathize with the plight of part-time instructors need to understand that this development has ominous implications for us all.

Gael Graham, History

In my November 3 copy of the Asheville Citizen, I read the following: "Manufacturers of items that carry the Duke University logo will be required to sign a pledge that they don't use sweat shop labor." Hats off to Duke for leading the way in this important human rights issue. I think that we should join them in their effort.

And I think we should go them one better. We should pledge ourselves to ensure that graduates who bear the WCU logo should not be the products of sweat shop labor, particularly in freshman composition and other general education courses. I salute Linda Kinnear for raising this very important human rights issue and challenge our leadership to do something about it.

Karl Nicholas, English

"Plight" is right. Unfair is unfair. I agree with Linda Kinnear's calling the plight of part-timers "demoralizing and exploitative." In a community espousing to be caring, civil, and creative, you would think we could come up with a better plan for the fair pay, career advancement, and university governance for all part-time faculty and staff.

Chris Gunn, Counseling and Psychological Services

Over the years my colleagues In Arts and Sciences (A&S) have chided me about using the language of business while discussing or debating university affairs. At the same time, A&S, as well as other colleges, has engaged in one of the most abusive of labor practices, taking advantage of a labor pool held captive by geography and family responsibilities. The most hard-nosed capitalist would be proud. The irony of this is that A&S is where we as a University profess the humanities. The second definition of humanities in my Webster's New World Dictionary is "2. The branches of learning concerned with human thought and relations. . . ." Are human relations (note the human) only abstractions? Is not humanism something we should practice as well as profess? An even sadder side to this story is that salary money that could have been added to part time faculty salaries has gone into the pockets of those of us, all of us, who are tenure track faculty. We have had a personal gain stemming from an abusive practice.

I still think that administrators and some faculty (faculty governance) must understand and use the language of business as WCU interacts with those players external to the University. That external environment provides all of the resources that support this University and people in boundary-spanning roles should speak the language. However, I do agree with my critics that there is a place in the heart of the University where that language has no place. That place Pirsig (1974) called the "church of reason." It is here that the Community of Scholarship identifies its values and beliefs, free from the marketplace, and then lives intellectually and practically by them. The observational data suggest that there is divergence between what we say we value and what we actually value. That is fundamentally dishonest. If we as a faculty are truly human in our core values and beliefs, in our "church of reason," then we will see to it that this abusive practice stops. If we are not truly human then perhaps we need to remove the word University from Western Carolina University and call it Western Carolina Factory.

Bill Kane, Management

**Responses to "The Plight of Part-Time Instructors: Two Similar Experiences,"
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There are two issues around here (at least two) that have been swept under the rug for years but have recently, for whatever reason, come back into the light. One of these is the issue of part-time faculty, so eloquently addressed by Linda Kinnear and Michael Waters in the last issue of the *Forum*. Another is the issue of large classes. What these two issues have in common is that they *will not go away*. Perhaps it is time for both of them to be addressed as openly and equitably as possible. Apparently, we simply do not have the faculty salary money or positions to hire full-time, tenure-track faculty to teach all of the classes presently covered by part-timers. And there are not even enough part-timers to assure that all classes have fewer than thirty students. However, there are things that can be done to make sure that these situations do not have a negative impact on the quality that we offer our students.

The use of part-time faculty does not of itself imply decreased academic quality. Many of our part-timers, and certainly the perpetual part-timers, are very capable and conscientious teachers. After all, if they don't do an adequate job, they simply don't get rehired. But the academic quality suffers when these "visitors" do not receive the support they need from those of us who have a more confirmed connection to the institution. These "visiting instructors" need to be provided with adequate information about our general education philosophy, its implementation, and our standards. Perhaps even before that they need a good sense of who our audience is and what to expect and demand from our students. We also must be willing to share resources such as computer access, office space, and secretarial support. And, of course, the compensation these hard working people receive must be adequate. We have to share the wealth (or lack of it) as equally as possible. Share. That means the rest of us must make sacrifices. The alternative is to try to get by without part-time help, and this is a really scary thought.

The use of large classes, similarly, does not have to equate with poor quality. We advertise that we offer small classes, and we certainly all prefer to teach them that way. In some subjects, small classes are a necessity. But it does not appear that the system will ever provide us with the resources to avoid large classes entirely. Fortunately, there are some faculty who are quite capable of doing a quality job with a larger-than-average class. With support such as supplemental instruction, tutoring, perhaps even paper-grading assistance (all less expensive than full-time tenure-track faculty positions), AND a really dynamic instructor, a large class can be a valid, quality educational experience. In the disciplines and departments where large classes are unavoidable and tolerable, we should place some relatively inexpensive resources to support this necessary evil rather than pretending it does not exist. If we do choose to recognize the large class situation as tolerable, we must modify our general education program to accommodate this teaching alternative. Again, we need to acknowledge and reward the people who can carry this burden for us with success.

Neither the use of part-time instruction nor the teaching of large classes is an element of our institutional ideal. Unfortunately, we do not live in an ideal world. We have been living without consciously recognizing these realities for some time, and we know we aren't happy. Perhaps it is time to consider the realities and the alternatives, suggested above.

anonymous

In response to Linda Kinnear's and Michael Waters' "The Plight of Part-Time Instructors," I'd like to go even further than they and attempt to look at the bigger picture, though only from the perspective of a part-time teacher of composition. The bigger picture, and perhaps the challenge, is this--in a world made more and more inhumane by the "cost-effectiveness" of contingency workers, is the university system not called upon to set a different example? If the university continues to treat part-time instructors as expendable commodities (which we surely are if one goes purely by a supply-and-demand model), then the university is merely following the example set by the corporate world. If we in the field of higher education offer no more compensation for dedication than does, say, Wal-Mart, then we, like Wal-Mart, are purveyors of the cheap and superficial, of the disposable, and, therefore, of the decay of anything like culture. Rather, shouldn't institutions of higher learning be setting an example, searching for deeper meaning in human affairs, demonstrating long-range vision, and intent upon the constant and real improvement of human life?

And while I am well aware of trends in contingency hiring, job retention (or lack thereof), and decreasing benefits in almost every sector of the working world, I continue to hold to the hope that my world, the world of education, still has enough idealism to prevent part-time positions from becoming business-as-usual concessions to complex financial situations. I continue to hope that these positions, which benefit no one in the long run, will not become deeply entrenched as part of financial operations because the ultimate result in the working environment is a lack of cohesiveness, positive feeling, and trust--which even the illusion of job security can help to create. I like to think that a university is still capable of challenging, rather than merely upholding, what is sadly becoming the norm.

Dawn Gilchrist-Young, English

**Responses to "The Plight of Part-Time Instructors: Two Similar Experiences,"
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I appreciate the comments of Linda Kinnear and Michael Waters in the last edition of the Faculty Forum. Most, if not all, universities in the United States rely on part-time faculty members for a portion of their instruction. Their terms of appointment are generally similar to what we have at WCU. Anyone who follows the Chronicle of Higher Education knows that these issues are being debated nationwide. Our present situation evolved over the years by means of a collegial process that involved full-time faculty and administrators, and a collegial process will be followed to address the issues that we now face. As the number of faculty positions and the funding that we receive are dependent on our enrollment, solutions will not be easy. However, the problems are real and must be addressed.

Richard Collings, Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs