Not Just a Matter of Fairness: Adjunct Faculty and Writing Programs in Two-Year Colleges

> Jeffrey Klausman

A survey of and follow-up interviews with adjunct faculty working with a writing program administrator or a similar person or committee reveal that adjunct faculty working conditions create more than a sense of unfairness; rather, they create a very real energy that works against the movement necessary to build a writing program out of a collection of writing classes, to develop the sense of a "we" moving toward a common goal.

Several years ago, when my college first financed a writing program administrator (WPA) position—reassigned time and a budget to pay adjunct faculty stipends for program development—I met with all of our most senior adjunct faculty. "Without you," I told them, "this effort to build a better writing program won't work. Participation and buy-in among adjunct faculty is essential." I knew from experience that any changes to curriculum, any new assessment processes, any new professional development initiatives would be viewed with suspicion by our adjunct faculty, who have no job security and who have historically been institutionally marginalized. Yet I also knew that very little had been written about creating and sustaining writing programs (as opposed to a loosely organized collection of classes) at two-year colleges. Since the WPA position was new on my campus and very rare in two-year college English departments in general, I conducted a survey and then follow-up interviews to better understand adjunct faculty attitudes toward and expectations of WPAs in two-year college English programs.

Much of what I found corroborated what I already suspected. For example, adjunct faculty feel marginalized on their own campuses and are somewhat to very resentful at teaching so much of a program's courses while receiving so little in terms of pay and benefits. Also, adjunct faculty are often invited to join full-time faculty in program work but have very little incentive to do that. However, what surprised me was the insight that these are not merely parallel issues. I was not able to say, for example, "Yes, I know the adjunct situation is unfair, but let's get to work on the program anyway." Instead, I came to see a dynamic relation: the institutional marginalization creates a kind of energy, acts as a centrifugal force countering the centripetal efforts of building a coherent writing program. Until the institutional marginalization ends—somehow—or until we consciously address the realities,

Copyright © 2010 by the National Council of Teachers of English. All rights reserved.

efforts to build a program out of a "collection of classes" at a two-year college will be undermined.

In what follows, I summarize the current context of adjunct faculty in two-year colleges, summarize the findings of the survey and interviews I conducted, and offer suggestions on how to work within and against this system of use and abuse.

The Context

My college is not unlike most: around two-thirds of all our classes are taught by adjunct faculty, and often the number is higher. Our adjuncts have no long-term contracts, though in our department an informal seniority system gives longer-term adjuncts—many with ten years of service or more—preference in staffing. Thanks to joint efforts at the state and local levels by our faculty union, adjunct faculty at my college, by my calculations, have a starting salary of around 93% of a full-time faculty's beginning salary (though pay increases for adjuncts fall behind that for full-time faculty); in our department, about half of our adjunct faculty receive health and retirement benefits equal to what full-time faculty receive. In contrast to the national picture, adjuncts at my college are in a relatively good situation—but we still have a ways to go.

By contrast, nationally the situation is generally worse. In 2004, 78% of two-year college faculty were non-tenure track (Bartholomae and Laurence). As bad as that sounds, Donald W. Green reports that Rio Salado College in Tempe, Arizona, "has only twenty-seven full-time faculty members but teaches 46,800 credit students and 14,000 noncredit students" (29). Perhaps at the opposite extreme, Yakima Valley Community College, in Washington state, has very few adjunct faculty, employing a majority of tenured and tenure-track faculty, probably due to the college's location, far from a major university that can offer a stream of recent graduate students and far from a major urban area (Calhoon-Dillahunt). My department has eleven full-time, tenure-track faculty (five hired within the last three years) and twenty-four to thirty adjunct faculty teaching less than 80% of a full-time load; this modest ratio is largely due to the initiative of the local union and administration to limit the exploitation of adjunct faculty. Nonetheless, a joint study by the Modern Language Association (MLA) and the Association of Departments of English (ADE) found that a "diminished and diminishing" segment of all faculty in all colleges are tenured or tenure track: in 1995, 42.2%; in 2005, 32.3%. There was a commensurate increase in full-time non-tenure-track faculty, from 16.8% in 1995 to 20.3% in 2005 (Bartholomae and Laurence; Laurence 13).

So the number of non-tenure-track faculty is growing and has been for quite some time. Against this trend is the fairly lofty ideal we sometimes hear: adjunct faculty "should be recognized and valued as professional colleagues working in collaboration with full-time faculty and administrators to achieve the teaching mission of America's community college" (Wallin 373). This sounds good. However, we are probably also aware of another more pressing reality—the financial reality:

"Proponents of the business culture [of a college] view adjunct faculty in a highly bifurcated and ambiguous manner," say Richard L. Wagoner, Amy Scott Metcalfe, and Israel Olaore: "a flexible, disposable temporary work force that can be counted on for years of dedicated service" (38). These contradictory views have led to two related problems that persist today: inequality of working conditions for adjunct faculty, and "outsider" status for adjunct faculty relative to the institutional culture (Wagoner, Metcalfe, and Olaore 26).

The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) states that employment conditions for adjunct faculty means they "do their work apart from the structures through which the curriculum, department, and institution are sustained and renewed" ("Statement"). And an assessment of adjunct faculty at one university found that adjuncts experienced a "sense of isolation" from their program and felt they were "out of the [university's] information loop" (Fagan-Wilen et al. 45–46).

Further, the AAUP warns of a "shrinking Brahmin class of professorial-rank faculty [who] enjoy academic careers and compensation commensurate with advanced training, while a growing caste of 'untouchable' educational service workers [. . .] obtain only poorly remunerated semester-to-semester jobs that offer no career prospects." Mary R. Lamb, speaking of her experiences at Georgia State University, which is moving adjunct to full-time instructorship positions, does not dismiss the opportunities of these full-time positions but fears they merely create "another (underpaid, subordinated) layer" of faculty (A8).

Recently, in an effort to address these issues, unions and coalitions at the local, state, and national level have been active, though with uncertain effect (see Lynn; Jaschik; Holler). Partly in response to this uncertainty, the National Coalition for Adjunct Faculty has been formed. Leaders of the group say that they aim to be "a national voice solely for the 70 percent of faculty members who work outside the tenure track" since existing faculty unions "cater to the concerns of tenured and tenure-track professors" (June). At the same time, administrators on many college campuses have been actively working to create better working conditions and professional development opportunities (see Lydic "What"; "Integrating"; TYCA Research). Yet, as David Lydic recognizes, "doing our best" and "making great strides" does not mean that equity and fairness have necessarily been achieved ("Austin") nor that everyone is happy.

What the literature does not tell us, however, is what impact the reliance upon adjunct faculty has on the creation and development of a writing program. Those interested in writing programs know it must have an impact since so many people with whom I talk mention the need to work within the predominant climate to reach out to adjunct faculty and to create means of addressing their needs. In other words, we take it as a known that adjunct faculty issues create a challenge to the development of a writing program, but I don't believe we've asked in what ways that difficulty operates. At two-year colleges, where, if the joint MLA-ADE study is correct, 78% of English faculty are adjunct (Laurence 13), such a question would seem crucial.

Initial Surveys

It was in this context that in 2006, as my college's first WPA, I began to study the impact of adjunct faculty on program development. To form a baseline, I decided to survey adjunct faculty who said they worked in an English department that has a WPA or WPA-like person or committee. This group would give information specific to program development efforts. I set up a Survey Monkey survey and sought participants via the WPA-listserv and through colleagues who I knew had writing programs administered by a WPA or WPA-like person or committee. I asked questions about the administrative structuring of the department, the role of the WPA, the respondent's attitudes toward and expectations of the WPA, and the respondent's demographics in terms of experience, degree earned, and so on. I received 93 responses from across the country—the Southeast, the Midwest, the Southwest, California, and the Pacific Northwest (though possibly elsewhere as well). It should be noted that these respondents were self-selected—I only heard from those who made the effort to take the survey and who self-identified as working with a WPA or WPA-like person or committee. In some cases, I contacted faculty at institutions where I knew a WPA-type position was in place and asked that they solicit responses.

Some of the more interesting responses are as follows: To the question of how much input to curriculum decisions adjunct faculty should have, 52.9% said that adjunct faculty should work equally with the WPA, while 26.5% said the WPA should lead curriculum development. To the question of whether the WPA values the expertise of adjunct faculty, such as seeking input on curricular issues, only 24.2% answered "Yes, very much," while 48.5% answered "Yes, somewhat," 21.2% answered "No, not very much," and 6.1% answered "No, not at all." To the question of what would increase the respondent's sense of being more valued, the responses receiving the most affirmatives were for having expertise on curriculum more valued (63.6%), being paid more equitably (60.6%), being compensated for attending meetings (57.3%), and having flexible meeting times (51.5%). Demographically, 40% of the respondents had eleven or more years of teaching experience, and slightly over 50% had coursework or a degree beyond a master's, with 27.2% having a doctorate or being ABD.

My tentative conclusions, which I presented at the CCCC convention in 2008, are that most adjunct faculty who work with a WPA or WPA-like person or committee tend to expect the program's leadership to work with them (as equals) in developing curriculum and assessment plans, most wish to have their expertise more highly valued though they feel fairly well respected, and most cite unfair working conditions and pay as major obstacles to their contributing to program work. My final conclusion was that adjunct faculty represent tremendous experience and expertise that is probably underused.

The survey I conducted had its flaws; nonetheless, the findings on years of experience and training match numbers I have heard both from the TYCA Research Initiative Committee and the ADE-MLA joint study (Laurence; Bartholomae and Laurence). More importantly, I believe the information it offered was valuable as

it fleshed out some of the concerns I had sensed among the adjunct faculty colleagues with whom I work; in particular, how being respected and having one's expertise both acknowledged and incorporated into program-building decisions were challenged by working conditions.

Follow-up Interviews

I wanted to understand the apparent disjunction in a key area of responses: that adjunct faculty feel "fairly well respected" but also feel their expertise was "undervalued." This seemed odd: How can they feel both "respected" and have their expertise not valued highly enough? Either this displayed a disquieting low self-esteem—"Well, my expertise isn't valued very highly, but that's what I deserve"—or opposing energies at work. Given my purpose—of understanding how adjunct faculty attitudes affect writing programs—understanding this disjunction seemed crucial. In 2008–09, I followed up on this survey with targeted email interviews.

Again, through the WPA-listserv and colleagues at other institutions, I solicited adjunct faculty who work with a WPA or WPA-like person or committee to answer a few questions following upon the 2007–08 survey. In addition to demographics, I asked for responses to the key findings from the 2007–08 survey and responses to these follow-up questions:

- What is your motivation for staying current in the field, staying involved?
- How involved in the running of your writing program are you?
- Does your institution encourage or discourage you from being a "full member" of the writing program?

I received nine responses: two from adjunct faculty at a two-year college in Arizona, two from a two-year college in Illinois, and two from a branch campus of a Research I institution in Washington State, plus three from faculty at my own college, though I did not rely much upon these since none of the responses were anonymous and, of course, I knew the respondents at my own institution. The responses were in the main very detailed, and all were quite frank. For most, I asked follow-up questions and received clarifying responses.

To the question of the respondent's motivation for staying current in the field, the responses all focused upon personal interest or enrichment or sense of duty as an instructor: "I enjoy working with my peers and truly want our program to be a wonderful learning experience for our students," said one respondent. Another said, "I enjoy teaching comp-rhet; I think it's an interesting subject." And still another said, "I like to stay involved for my own professional development and enjoy the community-building conversations about writing and teaching." None of the respondents mentioned professional advancement, job security, or increased pay, suggesting to me a disconnect between their sense of selves as professionals in a field and as members of a writing program or faculty of an institution. This is borne out by the next set of responses.

To the question of how much involvement the adjunct faculty member has in the running of the writing program, the responses heavily leaned toward unin-

volvement. One respondent said, "I am not allowed to become involved with my own English department's decision-making process." Another said, "These questions do not seem applicable to my position/situation." Still another replied, "Much of the [adjunct faculty] has no real loyalty or motivation to go above and beyond" to accept invitations to participate in program development. One simply replied, "None." There was an exception. One respondent reported being "lead adjunct faculty" and thus being very involved in the program, though this does not speak to the much larger majority of her adjunct faculty colleagues.

The question of whether the respondents feel the department or the college encourages or discourages them from being full members of the writing program goes to the heart, I believe, of the apparent disjunction I noted in the 2007–08 survey results—that while adjunct faculty tend to be fairly well respected, they also tend to feel undervalued. Most of the responses—much like my own thinking—seemed confused or contradictory, unable to explain this disjunction. But one response seemed to crystallize what I had been sensing and seeing:

> I believe that the department *encourages* all adjuncts to be a 'full member' of the writing program; whereas the institution *discourages* adjuncts from full status. In the department, adjuncts are invited to all department meetings, serve on committees and are encouraged to interact with the dean and other faculty. . . . [However] the institution, not only by the paycheck, but also as a general attitude among top to middle administrators, have made it clear that adjuncts are pretty much 'throw away' and designed for the 'dirtier' jobs, as it were. Although there are now efforts to offer training to adjuncts, I don't see encouragement to do much more than teach a class and try not to organize into a union or complain too much, and thus the institution does not seem to care or even want adjuncts to take ownership of any part of the college or its programs.

I have seen this institutional disregard on my own campus. I have been a leader in our faculty union—as president twice and chief negotiator of our contract once—and so I am keenly aware of how marginalized the adjunct faculty on my campus are made to feel. But I have also been a leader in our department—as chair twice and WPA for three years—and I know that the efforts I and my full-time colleagues make to encourage adjunct faculty to be full members of the program are very real.

My error has been in assuming, naively, that my work on behalf of adjunct faculty—even going to the state capitol and knocking on the doors of state legislators to lobby for adjunct faculty pay equity—would counter the fear and suspicion adjunct faculty might have toward my role as the new WPA. That is, my error has been in assuming that the "institutional disregard" and the departmental efforts at inclusion were simply parallel phenomena.

On the contrary. The disjunction between the institutional disregard on one hand and the genuine collegiality on the other is not merely interesting or lamentable but is a very real and tangible force that actively works against the development and cohesion of a writing program. I said at the 2009 CCCC convention in San Francisco that I noted a bifurcation emerging from the respondents:

> Among adjunct faculty there is evident an individual and personal desire for involvement in the field both professionally and, more importantly, intellectually, along with a commensurate ability to do so; and yet there is also an overall dissatisfaction over being shut out from full membership in their programs, one that suggests a violation of personal identity ("professional" v. "itinerant worker"). While "we" say that adjuncts are encouraged as professionals, the realities work against that. ("Attitudes")

The use and abuse of adjunct faculty goes beyond fairness. So long as we have powerful centrifugal realities creating an "energy" pushing adjunct faculty away from a coherent "us," our centripetal efforts to develop a program with shared curriculum, assessment, and professional development will be hampered.[1]

Suggestions and Reflections

Of course, we must all continue to work at the local level toward "best practices"—advocating for more tenure-track positions, pushing for equity in pay and benefits, establishing systems for job security, adequate support, training, and recognition. We must also continue to push for a radical restructuring of labor practices in higher education, though that is a much more distant hope. Perhaps something more we can do is make explicit this kind of research, which sheds light on how the realities of adjunct faculty working conditions impact efforts at building a writing program. In so doing, we might short-circuit some of the blaming that might go on, disarm some of the frustration.

For me, the most important benefits of this work probably lie in the future. I look forward to exploring how the idea of professionalism intersects with a more or less permanent "class" of adjunct faculty; exploring how personal desire and "imagined programs" (like Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities") impact program building and the perceptions and actions of a WPA in a two-year college; and how WPAs demonstrating leadership in the field of composition may affect colleagues' sense of their own place as professionals in an evolving English department and discipline.

That lies ahead. For now, I do not think I have a definitive answer to the question of how to work with adjunct faculty in building a program—certainly not one that "works" in addressing the core issues of uncertainty and marginalization. But this survey and these interviews have shed light on what I thought I knew and supposed, corroborating much and offering the one telling insight—that institutional marginalization is a dynamic, centrifugal force working against the centripetal efforts to build a cohesive program. Given this, I am in a better position to address the larger "field of play" of program building in a two-year college English department.

Note

1. William Klein and Suellyn Duffey, at the University of Missouri–St. Louis, are working on a theory of WPA work based not on tasks but on the concepts of time, space, place, and energy.

Works Cited

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso, 1983.

Bartholomae, David, and David Laurence. "The Report of the ADE Ad Hoc Committee on Staffing: A Discussion." Paper presented at the annual convention of the Conference on College Composition and Communication. Hilton San Francisco, San Francisco, CA. 13 Mar. 2009.

Calhoon-Dillahunt, Carolyn. Personal interview. Annual convention of the Conference on College Composition and Communication. 13 Mar. 2009.

Fagan-Wilen, Ruth, David W. Springer, Bob Ambrosino, and Barbara W. White. "The Support of Adjunct Faculty: An Academic Imperative." *Social Work Education* 25.1 (2006): 39–51.

Green, Donald W. "Adjunct Faculty and the Continuing Quest for Quality." *New Directions for Community Colleges* 140 (2007): 29–39.

Holler, Keith. "The Proper Advocates for Adjuncts." *Chronicle of Higher Education* 52:41 (16 June 2006): B11–12. *Academic Search Premier*. EBSCOhost. Whatcom Community College, Bellingham, WA. 22 Jan. 2009.

"Integrating Adjuncts into the Community through Professional Development, Support." *Academic Leader* 21.7 (2005): 1, 6.

Jaschik, Scott. "Creating a National Voice for Adjuncts." *Inside Higher Ed,* 20 Feb. 2009. 20 Feb. 2009 <http://insidehighered.com/news/2009/02/20/adjuncts>.

June, Audrey Williams. "An Activist Adjunct Shoulders the Weight of a New Advocacy Group." *Chronicle of Higher Education* 10 Sept. 2009: n. pag. Web. 22 Jan 2010.

Klausman, Jeffrey. "Attitudes and Expectations: Adjunct Faculty and WPAs at Two-Year and Small Colleges." Paper presented at annual convention of the Conference of College Composition and Communication. San Francisco Hilton, San Francisco, CA. 14 Mar. 2009.

Lamb, Mary R. "Growing Into and Out of My NTT Lecturer Position." *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* 36.3 (2009): A5–A8.

Laurence, David. "Demography of the Faculty: A Statistical Portrait of English and Foreign Languages." *Profession* 22. (2009): 245-266.

Lydic, David. "Austin Community College: Best Practices for Adjunct Faculty Working Conditions?" *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* 36.3 (2009): A9–A11.

———. "What Teaching Conditions Promote Part-time Teaching Success? How Can Writing Programs Build Such Conditions into Their Programs?" Paper

presented at the annual convention of the Conference of College Composition and Communication. San Francisco Hilton, San Francisco, CA. 14 Mar. 2009.

Lynn, Marjorie. "It's Hard Work, but Someone's Got to Do It! Unionizing in Southeast Michigan." *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* 36.3 (2009): A14–A16.

"New: The National Coalition for Adjunct Faculty." The New Faculty Majority. 8 Apr. 2009 <http://thenewfacultymajority.blogspot.com/2009/02/coming-national-coalition-for-adjunct.html>.

"Statement from the Conference on the Growing Use of Part-Time and Adjunct Faculty." American Association of University Professors. 26–28 Sept. 1997. 8 Apr. 2009 <http://www.aaup.org/aaup/issues/contingent/conferencestatement.htm>.

TYCA Research Initiative Committee. 2005. 8 Apr. 2009 <http://www.ncte.org/tyca/research>.

Wagoner, Richard L., Amy Scott Metcalfe, and Israel Olaore. "Fiscal Reality and Academic Quality: Part-Time Faculty and the Challenge to Organizational Culture at Community Colleges." *Community College Journal of Research and Practices* 29 (2005): 25–44.

Wallin, Desna L. "Valuing Professional Colleagues: Adjunct Faculty in Community and Technical Colleges." *Community College Journal of Research and Practices* 28 (2004): 373–91.

Jeffrey Klausman is a former WPA and current chair of the English Department at Whatcom Community College, in Bellingham, Washington; he also serves on the Executive Board of the Council of Writing Program Administrators.