

THE ADVOCATE

Newsletter of the NHMCCD Employee Federation

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Edited by Olin Joynton

Letters to the Editor: Further Responses to "Report from the Adjunct Ranks"

In response to your article, "Report from the Adjunct Ranks," I thought the interviews published in the NHMCCD newsletter entitled MAXIM [Winter 1996], which is sent to all the campuses as well as many local businesses, would be of interest to you. Upon reading the students' words when asked "Who has been the biggest influence in your college career?" you will find the high praise awarded to two adjunct faculty--one from Tomball and the other from Kingwood.

On a second note, I would like to ask that you not generalize about adjunct faculty staff members by saying that "Furthermore, most of them are angry and have to work hard to overcome the feeling that whatever they do for this college is done as a favor." As an adjunct teaching, I have never felt angry nor that I was doing the college a favor. I am very proud of my talents and consider the college fortunate that I take time out of my busy photography business to teach for a few hours each week. My only frustration is that I can't devote more time to the on-campus activities and art openings.

As a College District staff member once told me, "by having adjunct faculty members that come directly from the professional business world, they are better able to bring real life experiences to students." This not only helps the students to face the challenges after graduation, but also has in many cases, to my knowledge, inspired students to follow in the same field. This is evident in one of the interviews in the MAXIM newsletter.

It is my sincere hope that information has helped to shed some light on the opinions of a fellow adjunct faculty member who also loves teaching, sharing talents and knowledge with the many enthusiastic students, both credit and CE, to be found at North Harris College, as well as all of the campuses in the North Harris Montgomery Community College District.

--Sonya E. Buis
North Harris College

For over five years now, I have made my way from my home, along 1960, up Ella Blvd. to Richey Rd., across the railroad tracks at Hardy, past Nimitz High School and into the faculty parking lot at North Harris College. I teach in the Physical Education Department part time as an adjunct instructor. When I come to work I am prepared, optimistic, and thankful for the opportunity to teach. I keep up with any concerns or questions left by my students on my voice mail (given out the first day of classes) and return any calls within the day they're left. Simply put, I love my job. Since 1989, I have been treated with the utmost respect by all the full time staff in the Department, and receive a warm welcome whenever I enter the department. The other adjuncts and I have gotten to know each other through the years and enjoy a healthy exchange of ideas. We all possess a great respect for each other as well as a generous sense of humor. You see, many of us have been adjuncts for numerous years. We don't consider this a temporary job, just a *part time* job. One adjunct has been with NHC for over 15 years and considers this job "refreshing" after a full week in the secondary public school arena. I doubt that anyone is dragging this instructor to work, nor do I suspect she is working for anything but the good of the student and our department. She loves her job, too.

As far as going above and beyond the job description, I have gladly and enthusiastically written many recommendations from my computer for deserving students. I have listened to their concerns about school, home and family. If the department needs me for substituting or open gym, I am there. Often at local races, I can always count on former students coming up to me to say hello and telling me of their accomplishments since our time together. These encounters remind me of the impact one can have on students after the semester is over. The classroom never ends with a lock of the door, as any teacher will attest. And when I do have a concern, a question, or just want to investigate an idea, there is complete freedom to do so under the tutelage of Megan Franks, a great leader and listener. My paycheck goes to my son, who is studying at A&M. I am proud that my earned dollars go toward his education, his future.

Yes, I am privileged to be a member of the adjunct faculty here, and I do not find the negatives that were pointed out by Name Withheld. My son-in-law, who hopes to be a teacher someday, shared a quote with me that one of his professors gave him, and I'd like to share it with you. "Teaching is work, only if there's something else you'd rather be doing." Perhaps someday that quote will have a different meaning for me, but for now and these past five years at NHC, I can't think of anything else I'd rather be doing. So, Name Withheld, while I rejoice in your freedom to express your dissatisfaction with the system that has chosen to hire you, I cannot share in your unhappiness. Nor can I accept your complaints as those held by all adjuncts. I, for one, believe that the majority of adjuncts are fulfilled by the opportunity to teach those who have chosen to be in our classrooms. Ultimately, we as adjuncts are employed and evaluated by these students, as well as evaluated by the full time staff every year. If we do not come through for our students, then we don't deserve to teach. And finally, I hope that the chips sitting atop certain shoulders don't take away from the quality of teaching that we have worked so hard to attain, and the *esprit de corps* that exists for the majority of adjuncts at North Harris College.

--Beth Y. Spath
North Harris College

Reply from the Author

Considering the responses of Professors Buis and Spath, I suggest The Advocate poll our adjunct faculty to find out if their part-time status affects their attitude and if they would like higher pay and better benefits. We might also poll full-time faculty (separately) to ask whether they think having adjuncts make up 71.8% of teachers and teach 44.0% of sections at NHMCCD has any adverse effects on our curriculum or academic standards. I would be happy to assist in writing questions for both polls, and would welcome anyone else's checking these questions for fairness.

Surely we can point out our district's unfair labor practices and be good teachers at the same time. Asking for a livable wage doesn't mean we don't love our work or care about our students. After all, this union would not exist at NHMCCD if there had not been people who were dedicated both to students and fair treatment. Neither of the two letters printed here addresses low adjunct pay. But how many of us can afford to work without concern for money? Any way we examine the problem, we cannot deny that adjuncts make 40% per course of what a full-timer earns. Nor can we deny, as I mentioned in my last letter, that we earn only a few hundred dollars per year more than the average ninth grade drop-out. These are facts that have nothing to do with chips on the shoulder. As educators we should set an example for our students by thinking critically about our employment situation and speaking up.

The cover story of *U. S. News and World Report* on February 26, 1996 developed the theme that teachers' unions have ruined the nation's school systems by discouraging the most talented and qualified individuals from entering or remaining in the teaching profession. This reply to the story, written by AFT President Albert Shanker, appeared in the March 22, 1996 edition of *Action* and is reprinted here by permission.

LAST MONTH, *U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT* had a cover story called "Why Teachers Don't Teach" (February 26, 1996). It blamed our overall educational problems—and especially the fact that there are some incompetent teachers—on problems with teacher education, licensing, hiring, evaluation, tenure, and dismissal policies. And it pinned the blame for all these problems on teacher unions. These are important issues. Unfortunately the article was as accurate and constructive about them as the Willie Horton ad, which ran during the 1988 presidential campaign, was about our crime problems.

Yes, there are some bad teachers (and doctors, lawyers, barbers, parents, reporters, etc.). Teacher unions would strongly prefer there to be none. But we don't run colleges, teacher education programs or teacher licensing systems, though we've aggressively pursued much higher standards in all of them. And we're not the ones who routinely ignore even the modest teacher licensing standards by issuing "emergency" credentials to people who don't pass muster.

Nor do unions hire, evaluate, promote, or grant tenure to teachers. School boards and principals do that. *U.S. News* doesn't like the results but nevertheless argues that school boards and principals should be given an absolute, incontestable right to fire a teacher they evaluated favorably for years and then tenured. Why would their judgment be any better *after* they granted tenure than it was before, when they had unchecked power to fire or retain the teacher?

Tenure is a right to due process; it's not a job guarantee. Like democracy, it is hardly perfect, but it's better than the alternatives. It is certainly better than resting our faith on individual and governmental infallibility, which is what *U.S. News & World Report* would put in its place. A more practical and achievable solution for mere mortals would be to make the system for determining and removing incompetent teachers faster, more professional, and less legalistic.

Actually, the utopia that *U.S. News* longs for, where teachers have neither collective bargaining rights nor due process and school boards and principals can pretty much do what they like, already exists. It's called the American South. So here's a simple test. If teacher unions are responsible for the problems of our educational system, states like Texas, Alabama, and Mississippi should post much higher student achievement than the states where teachers have collective bargaining rights and due process

WHERE WE STAND

cess upon tenure. And they should be even farther ahead than, say, Japan, where teachers get tenure the day they are hired and unions are far more powerful than ours. Moreover, England, which gutted teacher unions and teacher rights under Margaret Thatcher, should have much higher student achievement than it did pre-Thatcher. Wrong on all counts.

U.S. News seems to think that collective bargaining agreements—the article calls them "teacher union contracts"—are written exclusively by teacher unions. Wrong again. They are the products of negotiations with school board representatives, and the results must be ratified by the school board, as well as by rank-and-file teachers. I've negotiated a lot of contracts, and there's not one I wholly liked. On some points the union wins, on others the school board wins, but usually there is a compromise. Once in a while, something gets through that shouldn't have, but both sides have to share the responsibility for that.

U.S. News also alleges that even teachers dislike the contracts negotiated by their union. No question that some teachers do. But the article's allegation that unions don't represent their members is preposterous. The "demands" the union puts on the negotiating table represent the views of the majority of teachers. Union officials and their members talk together constantly, educating one another about issues and about what's sound and doable—and union leaders stand for election every two years. The article also accuses teachers of pursuing their self-interest. Guilty as charged;

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that is the American way. But saying that teachers always put themselves ahead of the needs of students is as incredible as believing that the school boards we negotiate with never put themselves or the interests of management ahead of the interests of students or the public.

THE ARTICLE MAKES A BIG POINT ABOUT teachers teaching outside of their specialties. There is no question that this happens, but when math or science courses are taught by English or history teachers, it's rarely, if at all, because of unions or seniority rules; it's because of chronic shortages of teachers in these fields. And if it has ever happened that a union has demanded that a more senior teacher licensed in, say, math be allowed to bump a more junior teacher licensed in another subject or a high school teacher to bump an elementary teacher on the basis of seniority, somebody ought to come to the bargaining table and demand that the rules permitting these things be changed. We don't get rid of democracy because of occasional bad laws; we change the laws.

The cover girl for "Why Teachers Don't Teach" is a Harvard graduate who could not get a job substitute teaching in New York City, and the reporters allege that she illustrates how union rules and bureaucracy discourage the best young people from becoming teachers. Her story may be an example of a bureaucratic mess, but it is not a union mess. Assuming the facts are as reported, the young woman was unable to get her job because of licensing office procedures (over which the union has no authority). And if the teacher union—in this case the AFT—acts as a roadblock to getting talented people into teaching, then how come this young woman got a job in another school district where the AFT also represents the teachers?

It's a shame that *U.S. News & World Report* chose to take a cheap shot at teachers and their freely elected representatives when they could have dealt constructively with the serious issue of teacher quality. It will make the task of reform all the more difficult. How many talented young people did they encourage to come into or remain in teaching with their headline "Why Teachers Don't Teach" and by advocating that teachers should have no rights? Undoubtedly, a lot fewer than the ones they allege have fled teaching because of teacher unions, collective bargaining, and due process.

Remembering Dr. Tom Kelly

Editor's Note: Last month we featured two articles on Tom Kelly's life from his colleagues in the NHC English Department. The following letter gives a student's perspective.

Monday, April 1, 1996 started like any other class day. While driving to Tomball College I mused over the fine points in my lecture on Andrew Jackson, one of my favorite topics in American history, and also thought how I wanted to hurry up and finish teaching my class so I could return home and continue working on a dissertation chapter. The chapter finally started coming together on Sunday, and the agonizing process of assimilating reams of primary source material and translating it into something sensible was bearing fruit. When I flipped the power button to off, on the computer, I chuckled to myself about the day's efforts, "Perhaps not up to Tom Kelly's standard, but more than good enough for the rest of us in the academy!" Little did I know the tragic news that would greet me when I arrived at school Monday morning.

As I read the tributes to Professor Kelly written by Robert Miller and Michael McFarland and the shock began to set in, the sense of loss became acute. An irreplaceable resource had been lost, and future students at North Harris College would never again be able to enjoy Dr. Kelly's uncompromising dedication to scholarship and his refusal to accept anything less than one's best effort. I am absolutely convinced of this because I write these few words not as Tom Kelly's colleague but as a former student.

I met Dr. Kelly in January, 1984 when I enrolled in his class as an incoming freshman. As a nontraditional student who had spent four years in the navy as an enlisted man and then ten years as a steelworker, I initially regarded Dr. Kelly's stern manner as showboating. I assumed that once class began, I would cruise my way through it much like I did in high school. How wrong I was.

When class began in earnest, Dr. Kelly made it abundantly clear that we were in college. The work would be incessant, and if his requirements were not met then we should not expect to pass. Fifteen of the sixteen hearty souls who began the class dismissed his warning, and one who survived after drop date was glad he listened to it.

Professor Kelly sternly but patiently tutored me for the infamous "Mechanics Checks Test," which I passed on the third try. He critically and honestly evaluated my work without regard to my feelings. Long after my fifteen classmates dropped he served as my personal mentor into the beauty and power of American short story writers, and he never let me be complacent or satisfied with my work. I owe him a debt of gratitude that can never be repaid. Indeed, what success I have enjoyed in my academic career must be attributed to the foundation that Dr. Kelly gave me during that one semester so many years ago.

Whenever I write I have three reference works next to me. One is Kate Turabian's A Manual for Writers, Richard Marius' A Short Guide to Writing About History, and Webster's Dictionary. In the dictionary is a 3X5 card with my final grade and a short note from Dr. Kelly. The card has been in that book for twelve years, and I read the words whenever my creative energy runs out and I start to doubt the wisdom of pursuing a career as an academic. They say, "Your serious interest in education is a help to both of us. Keep it." I will Dr. Kelly, I will.

Farewell Mentor, Farewell.

--Michael Botson
Tomball College

Our Employees Are Our Most Valuable Asset

Beginning this semester, the college implemented a new policy regarding the Family Medical Leave Act. This act provides employees with twelve weeks of unpaid leave, with a guarantee of a job upon return, for several specific situations, including serious health conditions of the employee, care for a seriously ill family member, childbirth, and adoption. The law gives the college the option to begin Family Medical Leave(FML) after the employee has exhausted sick leave and short-term disability, or after five days of absence to run the FML concurrently with sick leave, retroactive to day one of the absence. Until this semester, the college chose the former approach. A review of the proposed board policy still on the Net under the college's home page(select publicatiions, policy manual, personnel, and then Family Medical Leave Act) reflects prior practice. However, this semester, the college has chosen to adopt the latter approach.

Let's say an employee has accumulated fifty days of sick leave, becomes seriously ill, and uses forty days. In the first option, the college could allow the employee to use the forty sick days and not begin FML. In practice, the college has chosen to run FML concurrently beginning with day one of the sick leave. In other words, for each day absent, the employee would lose both a sick day and a FML day. With this approach, when at the end of the illness, the employee would only have twenty FML days remaining. If the employee were able to return to work at the end of the forty days and then had a family member stricken by critical illness, the employee would be limited to only twenty FML days to care for that person.

To run FML and sick leave concurrently is a business decision. Defenders argue that it is too costly to run the sick leave and FML consecutively. FML is unpaid leave, so there is no significant economic burden. The burden is holding a position open for an extended period of time. In the worst case scenario, if the leaves ran consecutively, the college would have to hold a position for an employee for a little over five months, assuming the employee began with the maximum number of sick leave days, sixty-five. Certainly, there are some positions for which it would be difficult to use a temporary employee or reassign an employee's responsibilities for five months.

However, this difficulty could be managed. It has been managed in the past. To run the two leaves simultaneously charges an employee's single absence against two leave banks, robbing the employee of leave time. We hear frequently, from the top of this organization down, that our employees are our most valuable asset. The decision to run leaves concurrently is yet another administrative decision that appears to belie this philosophy.

--Alan Hall