

THE ADVOCATE

Newsletter of the NHMCCD Employee Federation

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Edited by Olin Joynton

REPORT FROM THE ADJUNCT RANKS

I write as one concerned about the effect that current adjunct hiring practices have on the education our institution can provide for its student. I know that next to many community colleges, NHMCCD has high standards, but we still have a shockingly high percentage of part-time faculty, one that exceeds the national average, and which ultimately undermines all of the retention studies and tutoring labs we provide, not to mention the rigorous efforts we make to hire our full-time faculty. Here's why.

The latest statistics from the U. S. Department of Education report that as of 1991 full-time faculty members comprised 42.9% of all faculty at public two-year colleges in the U. S., while adjuncts made up 57.1%. By contrast, according to NHMCCD's own figures acquired through the Freedom of Information Act, only 28.2% of our spring 1996 faculty are full-time, while 71.8% are adjuncts. Here's how these numbers break down both across the district and at each campus:

Spring 96	Full-Time	Part-Time
Disctrictwide (including 97 adjuncts at off-campus sites)	325 (28.2%)	826 (71.8%)
NHC	173 (38.5%)	276 (61.5%)
Kingwood	58 (26.2%)	163 (73.8%)
Tomball	56 (27.3%)	149 (72.7%)
Montgomery	38 (21.2%)	141 (78.8%)

Looking at this chart, it is not hard to see that across the district, most of the faculty that our students come into contact with on campus are those who, because they receive per course only about 40% of a full-timer's pay, are never assured employment from one semester to the next, and have no benefits like insurance or guaranteed professional leave, probably do not have the same commitment to NHMCCD's goals that a full-time instructor would have. Of course, to be fair, adjuncts do have a retirement plan, but with their plan they pay in 6.2% of their gross income and receive only 1.3% in matching funds, while full-time faculty, on the other hand, pay in 6.4% and receive a total of 8.5% in matching funds. Adjuncts simply aren't given enough incentives to feel great loyalty to this district, and we cannot deny that this neglect eventually trickles down to our students.

This is not to say that most adjunct instructors don't care about their jobs--not at all. In fact, most adjunct faculty (myself included) love teaching and devote themselves to their work, in spite of how poorly this institution treats them. But most of them are not as accessible to students because they simply cannot spend as much time on campus as full-time faculty. 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. So what kind of a message does our district send to its students about serious standards when 71% percent of its teachers are almost provoked into doing a poor job? How can these adjunct instructors send the message that our students' "star is within reach" if their own stars have simply fallen from the sky? Our reckless hiring practices--of signing people on now and questioning their credentials later, of frantically trying to fill class slots just days before a class is scheduled to begin--send the message that ultimately we don't hold much hope for our students' future and we don't respect them. That message is hypocritical at best, immoral at worst.

Fallen from the sky is not an exaggeration of the adjunct employment situation either. At the rate of \$1390 per course (a number that falls in the middle range on the adjunct pay scale), an adjunct instructor in the Houston area may be able to scrape together \$19,460 a year without benefits--but that is provided he or she teaches five classes per term, commutes to at least two different colleges, and manages to secure two courses per summer term each year (which most of us can never swing). Some people may view this income as reasonable, but the Statistical Abstract of the United States for 1995 shows that the average male in America who has less than a ninth grade education and works all year makes 18,697--not even \$1,000 less than our master's plus educated adjuncts. Is that all our institution is willing to pay for the education it provides?

Some may argue that it is foolish for any adjunct faculty member to try to piece together a livable income with several part-time teaching jobs because adjunct pay was never intended to be anything more than supplemental. However, this argument assumes that most adjuncts are professionals who just want to dabble in teaching and donate their time to their community, as they may have been in the fifties and sixties when community colleges did not rely so heavily upon part-time help. But most adjuncts today don't want to donate their time. Many cannot get by without their adjunct income and have committed so much of their education, money, and time to a teaching career that they can't easily walk away and find another profession.

Some may also say that many adjuncts have full-time jobs elsewhere and don't earn such a low income. My answer to this argument is that outside employment still does not excuse inordinately low pay. The work an adjunct does in each course still equals that of a full-time faculty member. Even allowing for the committee work, registration duty, and other administrative tasks a full-timer fulfills outside of teaching, one cannot account for a 60% difference in pay.

All of these disparities ultimately make many adjuncts unfairly resent full-time faculty, most of whom have devoted their lives to a profession that realistically provides only a modest income. Furthermore, relying on so many adjuncts puts full-timers in the awkward position of being responsible for a curriculum over which they do not have sufficient control. Ultimately, no faculty workshops on student retention, Title III grants, or math, writing, and computer labs can undo the unspoken message that low pay and neglect translate to our students, a message that says that the quality of the education NHMCCD provides is inconsistent.

Like many community colleges, our district is addicted to cheap labor, to expansion without due regard for human costs or morality. When we opened our first campus in 1974, only 27.4% of our faculty were full-time. That was fine in our early years when we were just getting started, but why are we still operating at this level? If growing means that we cannot keep our doors open without being unfair to over half of our work force, then we need to rethink our role as an institution of higher learning.

Name withheld

The author has requested information on the percentage of sections taught by adjunct vs. full-time faculty across the district. It did not arrive before this issue had to go to press. We look forward to providing this information in the next issue. The Advocate would welcome comment on the issues raised here from anyone in the NHMCCD community.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

I've spent some time thinking about your January article on ethics in the workplace and find, to my dismay, that I have lots of questions and almost no definitive answers.

Those of us who love both the theory and the practice of our professions are usually clear-sighted about our individual pursuit of the job. We come to the task with a love of an area, medicine, for example, and we pride ourselves that each day's work is practiced with diligence and true endeavor. Many of us in education love our discipline above all; we are in a specific field because we want to spend our days and nights with biology or art. As long as we, as individual teachers, are allowed to wallow in a particular subject, we may not worry too much about the other guys and what they're doing.

Perhaps we should worry a lot about the other guys. We teach each other's students; we hope to build on what's gone before in earlier classrooms; we plan to send our students on from us with the capabilities legitimately expected by their upcoming teachers or future employers. The question becomes how we view the collective mandate given to teachers. Of course, we want to do our best; that's a given, but what do we do about other teachers who are obviously short-changing their students or simply doing a lousy job? Where is our individual and collective responsibility here?

We are conditioned from childhood to despise snitches, tattle-tales, stoolies. Do we as adults carry this attitude over to our profession? Would we want our primary care physician to hand us over to just any old alleged "specialist," not taking that person's skill and concern into account? How do we feel about people in the medical field who accuse certain doctors of malpractice? Do we cheer them on? I suspect we do, especially when we see such episodes on "60 Minutes." What do we do, by extension, for our own students when we know they are enrolling in a class taught by an inferior teacher? Do we stop them? Probably we try gently to move them into a more worthwhile section, but is this action enough? Is it professional in the best sense of the word? Suppose we pass a classroom and hear absolute rot coming from the instructor's mouth: old blathering stories with no real point, no relevance to the material described in the catalogue, no mark of considered pedagogy. Do we, in frustration simply go to a friend and say, "Professor X is as big a moron today as he was last week." Is that enough? And what about Prof. X's academic freedom? Is one person's blather another person's reasoned discourse? And how do we judge?

How do we live up to our mandate as responsible teachers with commitment to excellence in the classroom and still silently tolerate clear incompetence that we see?

Provocative first article, Olin. I wish I had something other than questions. No doubt someone else will be clearer and more worthwhile on an issue that clearly deserves our attention.

Pat Gray, English, NHC