Crossing the Divide: The Conversation that Adjunct and Full-time Faculty Need to Have

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Good Adjuncts:

In our great battle against the exploitation we experience, perhaps our biggest challenge is reaching across what I will refer to her as “the big divide,” or the differences in perception between full-time and adjunct/contingent faculty.

What exactly are these differences in perception? Well, first of all, let me say what they ***generally aren’t*** on the whole.

Some of the angrier of adjuncts (and by the way, it’s OK to be angry, but  I would advise it’s better to be angry and strategic), will conclude that most full-timers operate with the assumption that they are full-timers because they are simply “the best” and deserving of the privileges of higher salary, job security, and good benefits.

On the other hand, full-timers will conclude that adjuncts are “simply mad because they couldn’t get a full-time job,” can never be satisfied, and either don’t or can’t appreciate the additional outside-of-the-classroom duties and responsibilities that come with the full-time job.

The number of full-timers who I have met who wholly and openly subscribe to the above view I can count on one hand.  Conversely, the number of adjuncts who I would say wholly fit the aforementioned full-time perception is also in the single digits.

Why is it out there? It’s because adjuncts and full-timers don’t talk to each other nearly enough.

With regard to the adjunct issue, the biggest sense I have is that nearly all full-timers agree that the system is unfair, exploitative, and none of them would like to return to working as an adjunct.  Many of them are truly pained over the fact that they work alongside people who are every bit as qualified as they are, and sometimes even more so.  The hiring process, with all its byzantine twists and turns, is something they take seriously, but they feel frustrated by the fact it produces only a few full-timers, and that it’s not narrowing the diversity gap. They despair of the institution filling the gaps in the loss of full-time positions with increasing numbers of adjunct and contingent jobs.  At the same time, in part because of the loss of full time instructors, and because of the corporate creep of results-based learning based on largely  abstract and numerical data, many full-timers are feeling extremely harried and overburdened, and feel that if they’re going to be forced to endure this nonsense, then at least they should be fairly compensated for it.  Many like and highly respect their adjunct colleagues.

As for adjuncts, yeah, there are people angry about not getting a full-time job, but the bigger problem is that the overall lack of pay has created enormous strains on their life from basic living health.  Further, they are angry because even when they do good work, or even work in unpaid, outside-of-the-classroom capacities, there’s no guarantee they will even have a job the following semester, let alone even getting closer to that coveted full-time position.  Often they feel further tweaked when they’re hit up in evaluations for not always being up to speed with the latest teaching trends and technology, despite the fact they have no time or money.  That said, adjuncts do care deeply about their departments (even the ones who don’t show up to the department meetings which are often scheduled which they are least convenient to adjuncts).  They like to see their students and the program succeed, and will just as be inclined to talk about curricular development and student progress as they will bitch about the sorry nature of their jobs.  Many would love to sit and do (where possible), sit on committees.  Many also like their full-time colleagues.

OK, now that said, here’s where the real divide is.  Most full-timers, while acknowledging that full-timers are underpaid and work under bad conditions, feel that the essential task to solving the problem is to create more full-time  positions, and reduce adjunct labor to preferably around 25% of instruction.  This sort of thinking operates around the notion that an adjunct is an incomplete worker used to deal provide instruction in the face of a paucity in funding.  In other words, the solution is to “make the adjunct whole” by converting them to a full-time position.

As for adjuncts in general, the view, as you may know, is very different.  Adjuncts know that there is no magic fairy that’s going to float down from the sky and supply the billions of dollars it would take to create the tens of thousands of full-time faculty jobs to realize the dream of 75/25 full-time/adjunct instruction.  The fact of the matter is, even under the best of conditions, the realization of more full-time jobs will be slow and steady, and then only if budgeting priorities and the general will of the people will call for it.  This still means, in many cases, up to 200+adjuncts applying for one full-time job.

Maybe more importantly, what it means is that adjuncts and their vast numbers aren’t going away any time soon.  Sure, most adjuncts want a full-time job, and they also want to win the lottery.

Adjuncts want full-timers to realize that they have more than wishes-they have immediate needs, and the most glaring is better, and dare we say it, [equal pay](https://adjunctcrisis.com/2016/05/10/in-unity-a-strong-active-union-equal-pay-for-adjuncts/).  In fairness, equal pay is almost the same pipe dream, but a steady movement towards that goal by incrementally increasing adjunct pay in relation to full-time pay is doable, as is adding, slowly but surely more full-time positions.

In other words, adjuncts, at least reasonably thinking ones, see it not as a case of either/or (full-time positions/equity pay), but ***both/and***.

This is not immediately easy for many full-timers to fully accept for a number of reasons.  To them, the immediate challenge to their own work conditions is the lack of full-time colleagues, which hurts everything from their workload, to their union numbers, to control over their lives.  They want more pay for what they clearly see as more work, and its understandable.  At the same time however, to increase adjuncts wages so that they are more equitable to full-time pay means having to get the money from somewhere, and this is where the real challenge comes.

I know, I know, I hear my adjunct legions screaming, “Who cares about what they want? To pay us equitably, even if this means lesser pay for full-timers, is simply correcting a past wrong.” Perhaps, but good luck selling that idea, and if you were a full-timer, with the increased pressures you’re facing, would you buy it? I also know that some of you may argue that it would simply be a matter of adjuncts overtaking their locals. In both my locals, adjuncts far outnumber full-timers, but from what I’ve seen, there’s no imminent possibility of that happening, nor is it likely it would actually make things better.

The way equity pay has to be sold is that it needs to be combined with the increase of full-time jobs, and it has to create avenues where adjuncts (who are paid) can step into outside-of-the-classroom roles that were exclusively reserved for full-timers.  The workload on full-time faculty needs to be eased. Equity pay should also, for the most part, be driven by statewide funding measures rather than forcing unions into fighting among their members.  This is where adjuncts and full-timers alike need to come together and sell equity as for the good of learning environment, students, and the community as a whole.

This doesn’t mean that local unions should singly address equity in their own contracts. The state needs to help and lead the way. It was after all, at least in California, the state legislature that created adjuncts, not local community colleges.

This is where adjunct-full-time conversations need to lead.  How does it start? I would suggest at first, one-on-one, and it’s going to take time, listening as well as speaking, and holding our adjuncts breaths at moments.  We can do this, and quite honestly, we must.

Geoff Johnson,

A “Good” Adjunct