[How to Screw an Adjunct Part I: Out with the Old, in with the New](https://adjunctcrisis.com/2016/01/20/how-to-screw-an-adjunct-part-i-out-with-the-old-in-with-the-new/)

[*January 20, 2016*](https://adjunctcrisis.com/2016/01/20/how-to-screw-an-adjunct-part-i-out-with-the-old-in-with-the-new/)*by [mixinminao](https://adjunctcrisis.com/author/mixinminao/" \o "View all posts by mixinminao)*

Good Adjuncts,

For my next few posts, I will be addressing how adjuncts are driven out of the profession either intentionally or otherwise through the actions of Deans, Department Chairs, and Full-timers.

The first of these practices is necessarily intentional, fairly venal, and therefore deserving of the first such post—what I affectionately call “Out with the Old, in with the New.”

Whether we want to admit it or not, Western culture is highly youth-oriented, and, as most of the students in Higher Ed. are under the age of 25, there is an unstated, yet clearly present pressure on academia to remain “relevant” to its student body with youthful professors.

It doesn’t matter that in the past teachers tended to be older while students were younger–the rise of web-based everything has led to a positivist immediacy where everything newer is better, and everything new itself must be ever so tweaked to be “better”. At the same time, there is a student body coming to our institutions who are increasingly less self-efficacious—they are less inclined to reading textbooks, even when made available online, and more inclined to look for a You Tube video or Wikipedia post for their information.

Now to some extent the Higher Ed. community gets this, and at face value claims to promote the idea of teaching people self-efficacy or independent learning, and we have all heard of the Dean, Vice President, or President who at either a convocation or school meeting exhorts the faculty to challenge their students and strive for a high abstract ideal, usually conveyed in the school slogan of the year, like “Excellence in Education.”

The truth of the matter is this: an adjunct can challenge his or her students, but if, over time, the number of students completing the course should significantly drop, or should a small cadre of students complain, even if the adjunct may have received strong evaluations, that teacher will have a number on his or her back.

As a union adjunct rep at two different community colleges, I am often approached by adjuncts having to grieve for their jobs, and the most common issue has to do with older adjuncts finding themselves either being declared ineligible to teach, or, after years of successful evaluations, suddenly in trouble.

Let’s talk about the eligibility issue first. In an ideal world, a person teaching Math at the community college level would have a Masters or Doctoral Degree in Math.  The problem is, and this is true in many disciplines, most of the people holding these degrees can get more lucrative or stable jobs elsewhere, meaning the pool of available candidates to teach is small.  (Now the real solution to this problem would be to hire on more teachers into full-time positions, or simply to pay these adjuncts a higher wage and provide some job security, but this would require money, and that would require courage from administrators and politicians, and an honest discussion with the voting public, and this hasn’t even remotely happened yet.)  Therefore, to meet the demand administrators will seek out people with equivalent qualifications to do the job.

Generally speaking, these people, in the case of Math, will hold Masters or Ph.D.’s in related fields, like Engineering, and clearly to have the knowledge and skills to teach basic skills and freshman level Math courses.  Notably, a surprising number of these teachers are foreign-born and educated.  Very often, they are a good fit for the school, they teach well, and are serious about their work.

Yet the fact of the matter is, in the eyes of a Dean, they aren’t a “real” teacher because they don’t actually have the field-specific degree.  The Dean is still dreaming about that ideal world in which all his/her faculty, full-time or adjunct, have that subject-specific degree.  The problem is, that these adjunct instructors have been doing a good job and getting satisfactory evaluations.  What further complicates this is that in some cases, these adjuncts will have things like priority rehire rights, which means that the Dean cannot, by personal choice alone, get rid of these teachers easily.

But this doesn’t mean the Dean is going to give up striving to get what they want, and this is where equivalency status comes into play. At the California Community College level, equivalency status can either be determined by a committee, or by Dean. In part, because Deans are often looking for an instructor on the fly, they may simply give one of these teachers immediate equivalency. Further, because the Dean is initially happy with the arrangement, quarters or semesters will go by with the Dean never challenging the equivalency status of the adjunct.

The thing is, unless an instructor goes through an actual *equivalency committee* his/her equivalency status is temporary, meaning form term to term.  And moreover, a Dean will often (and perhaps conveniently) neglect to inform the instructor of this. This means that should a Dean have a change of heart, they can draw into question the qualifications of even the most successful and longest teaching adjuncts who lack the subject specific degree.  Sometimes, because there is usually about a 5-10 year turnaround on Deans, a new Dean might come in and decide to “clean house”, especially when he/she sees some promising new teachers coming onto the scene with subject-specific degrees in mind.  I was loosely involved with one case in which a teacher with 20+ years of experience was let go, not because of his teaching, but because it was suddenly decided he no longer had equivalency status.

Playing Devil’s Advocate, I suppose one could argue that there is a legitimacy issue here in that you should have people with Math Degrees teaching Math, but from a qualitative standpoint, if both the students and the teacher’s fellow adjunct and full-time faculty are satisfied with his/her work, it makes sense to keep that instructor.  But then again, that wouldn’t be keeping with the notion of “Out with the Old, in with the New.”

The more common drama facing older adjuncts is the shift in evaluations.  Understand that most school like to keep teachers, including adjuncts, at least to the extent that they provide continuity and help their respective departments and schools achieve their goals.  The thing is, they often want to keep them around for only so long.

Many adjuncts, when they first come into a job, are excited about their work, and are eager to please, which means regular attendance at department meetings, professional development exercises, conferences, and involvement in shared governance, tutoring centers, etc.… Over time, it can get harder to sustain these activities in that they have to spread themselves out over several campuses in multiple districts, have other jobs, or family responsibilities.  Many older adjuncts are not faced just with the issue of children, but rather, older parents.  Further, let’s face it, it’s not always easy to get a good schedule as an adjunct.  Often they get early morning or evening classes, or classes taught off site at high school, higher ed. centers, and extensions. These are the classes at times and locations full-time instructors do not want to teach.

One of the other issues I see come up among these older adjuncts is how they often become “isolated” professionally, or by a presumption that if they are simply adjuncts that they should singularly focus on their relationship with students.

During this same time, full-time instructors will likely be actively engaged in professional development and departmental matters at a specific campus.  In addition to it being easier to do at a single campus where they don’t lose 5-15 hours a week of transportation and set-up time, it is actually part of their job title–they are awarded tenure on the amount of outside the classroom work that they do, and are compensated for it in salaries which are often two to three times what an adjunct makes for an equivalent teaching load.  Further, it will not only be easier for these instructors to get money to attend conferences, it will also be easier for them to get release time from work in that they only have to deal with one employer.  Moreover, full-time instructors can and often do apply for sabbaticals multiple times during their careers, giving them the opportunity to bone up on additional coursework at the school’s expense without having to work.

One can thus imagine that the rate of evolution in teaching techniques and styles is often, though not always higher, among full-timers.  (There are some full-timers who do the minimum and simply check out, but this is another issue).  One can also imagine that these full-timers will inherently be inclined to look closer at and think more highly of those young, go-getter adjuncts, and over time, think less and less of the older adjuncts.

In fact, some of these adjuncts can get regarded with contempt.  I can recall one of the more adjunct-friendly full-timers commenting to me that “…there are just some of the older adjunct who only show up to teach and never talk to me.  I’d just wish they’d quit or go away.”

I would also like to assert that there is a bit of sexism that plays a role here as well.  With younger, less mature populations, older female adjuncts will often find themselves dealing with disciplinary issues, particularly in basic skills classes, and far too often, the attitude of full-timers and Deans is that the teacher is a problem.

I think good adjuncts, you can imagine what the cumulative impact of the above is on older adjuncts, and how, after years of successful teaching, they can find themselves facing a poor evaluation and the end of a career, for old adjuncts rarely retire, so much as they are simply left off the schedule.

Well then, what can be done regarding this issue of “Out with the Old, in with the New”?

First of all, Deans need to be held accountable for who they hire, and do the proper diligence to see that teachers who have been awarded Equivalency” status.  *Any* equivalent hire should be subsequently taken to an equivalency committee in the semester of an adjunct’s hire to either confirm or deny their status. The equivalency card should no longer be a tool for a Dean’s creative way of dealing with personnel.

As regards older adjuncts in general, full-timers need to develop some empathy and understanding.  Talk to your full-time colleagues about these issues.

By the way, just because it’s harder for an older adjunct to grow in his/her profession doesn’t mean he/she should be excused from having to do it.  When he/she can manage it, they should participate in professional development and other departmental activities, and though they should also be paid for it, payment can’t always be the expectation or motivation.  Teaching is a collaborative activity, and so it’s important for adjuncts to interact with other colleagues, even if it’s only online, but preferably, in person.

Anyway Older Adjuncts, shield yourselves, and younger adjuncts, take note, because nearly all Older Adjuncts started off like you, and despite your full-time aspirations, many of you will become us.

A “Good” Old Adjunct

Geoff Johnson