The Way Forward: It Gets Complicated

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Good Adjuncts:

Now that we’ve acquired a bit of steam from the events of last week, what we do with it and how we make it sustainable is a big concern, and yes, a complicated one.

As a “national” action, NAWD was able to put out some salient points: 1) that adjuncts are treated shabbily, 2) they are an essential, not auxiliary part of academia, and 3) their ill treatment hurts educational institutions, students, and society as a whole.

But see, the thing is it’s easy to point out problems, and far harder to come up with solutions that can be practically achieved.

For the record, as if this needs to be said, what adjuncts need, first and foremost, is full-time employment, and short of that, the same sort of respect in terms of pay, benefits and opportunities as full-time contract teachers with respect to the amount and kind of work they do.

Anyway, the groups I worked with for NAWD concentrated mostly on the categorical allocation of funds for paid adjunct office hours, equity pay, and more full-time positions.  We did this because, 1) the money was there 2) It was something specific 3) it would immediately improve the situation for adjuncts 4) it can be attained easily.

Our situation was also specific to the California state government, which controls our community colleges’ funding, and generally sets labor policy.

We also pursued it because we knew we could get buy-in from a coalition of groups like students, full-time faculty, governing board members and legislators, and even some administrators.

The big challenge here, and the mountain yet before us, is Governor Brown, but more so an outdated philosophy regarding “local” control.  To be brief, this philosophy is that local districts inherently have a better idea of how money should be spent and so therefore the state should effectively pass on the pots of money exercising as little control as possible as to how this money should be spent.  Well, being that this money is largely controlled by local administrators and boards, this has meant that much of this money has gone to places they deem most important, and this has often been at the expense of instruction.

It should be no surprise that administrative services and the money paid to administrators has more or less exploded in relation to the money put towards instruction, nor should it be a surprise that these groups, whether intentionally or no have come to regard adjunct labor as both expendable and exploitable.  As long as administrator’s hands are not categorically forced to deal with instruction properly, school budgets will always be balanced on the backs of adjuncts.

There is of course, two other, more sinister forces at work–political posturing and straight up corruption.

First, in case many of you haven’t figured it out, more often than not, the people who run to be on school boards are not doing simply out of the kindness of their hearts, or because they have a deep commitment to education.  Now by saying this, I’m aware there are true public servants out there and I feel that lately I’ve been working with a few, but let’s be real. Many governing board members are simply filling their resumes for higher office, or are burnishing their public image either for business, or to simply self-aggrandize.  These are people who are often ready to buy into the sound-bite culture of incompetent culture-corrupting teachers, whiny unions, bloated budgets, wasteful spending, etc.  These people see teachers as public servants, and I mean in the Downton Abbey sense of the word servant.

By contrast, they are big on promoting high-profile projects that at times will be more flash than substance, and love creating more and more of those links between the institution and the almighty business community.  This will sometimes lead to things like thousands of dollars being spent on sending a select group of students to a swanky leadership conference while the adjunct office will go for a week or two without a 120 dollar toner cartridge because we (the wasteful adjuncts) need to conserve resources–just put the student handouts up on blackboard, nevermind whether some of your more indigent students can actually afford to download it.

By the way, I’m not anti-business, and community colleges should have such relationships, but I teach World Religions, so you can imagine why I might have a little problem when a curriculum’s worth is evaluated in terms of its strict utilitarian value.

Then of course, there’s the straight up corruption.  Anybody ever notice how local construction companies and certain academic vendors take a very strong interest in local school board elections?  Ever wonder how these groups, many of whom who are fiscally conservative and actually small government, can suddenly get behind large bond measures?  Did you really think it was because these groups really have a soft spot for the work you do?

I’ll assume that, being as I like to think of my readers as smart, that you would give a big “NO” as an answer to the last question.  One of the latest trends in academia is the building of Wellness Centers on college campuses with the idea that they be open to the general public, and hey, if you can get a private company to run the the site, even better.  Better yet is to charge higher prices than local privately-owned fitness centers operations to boot, then to pitch the whole project as a future revenue stream for the college.

Meanwhile, as for the rotting classroom with rat infestations and lack of adjunct office space?  Well, we all have to make do, you know, and perhaps we can address that in the next bond measure…provided the public will go along with it.

Now bond funds are never used for instruction, but if bond funds are not being directed towards the direct support of instruction, what do you suppose is going to happen to the monies that are with the “stellar” track record up above?

What this all means is that more than just getting a few categorical items in a budget, there has to be a fundamental change in philosophy as to how community colleges and academic institutions are managed, and it needs to come from the top down and with an eye on both transparency and equity.

…And it’s going to take some courage, particularly on the part of the governor of California, to step up and actually starting calling some specific shots and setting priorities rather than waving his hands and telling someone else to do it, or wait for some initiative mandate from the voters, particularly when the initiative process is largely dominated by private big money.

The question California adjuncts and their supporters should be asking themselves now is, how to we get the governor to see what needs to be done?

By the way, there is also talk of a adjunct job security bill as well, and while it faces the same problem of local control, it represents a another can of worms which is perhaps even more complicated and divisive within adjunct ranks.

That will be the subject of my next entry.

Till then, be strong and keep up the good fight good adjuncts.

Geoff Johnson

A Good Adjunct