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From Where I Sit: Worker Bees are doing more for less of the honey

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Worker bees are doing more for less of the honey

An academy built on low-wage, part-time staff will be a deficient and unworthy one, argues Deborah Rogers

April 30, 2015



Source: Alamy

Henny Penny, the chicken in the children's tale who feared the sky was about to fall, would have a point if she were talking about US universities.

We are, for the most part, operating with few full-time faculty who hold doctorates. Instead, we are exploiting what has been dubbed "the new majority", that is, adjuncts (part-time instructors), to provide cheap labour.

Although some adjuncts are professionals who offer real-world expertise and have steady incomes in their particular fields outside academia, most piece together an income below the national poverty line by moving from campus to campus to teach for peanuts. Hours are restricted so that institutions aren't responsible for providing health insurance, retirement packages or job security. An itinerant labourer probably makes more money than an adjunct.

I ought to know. I used to be one.

Back in the 1980s, when I was completing my PhD at [Columbia University](#), I regularly taught two courses at Columbia and then ran across town to teach two more at the [City University of New York](#)'s Hunter College. If hours spent preparing classes, grading papers and meeting with students are taken into account, I would have made more money flipping burgers at McDonald's.

According to the American Association of University Professors (the source for most of the figures in this piece), in 1975, 45 per cent of teaching staff were "tenure line" and 55 per cent "contingent". By 2011, things had got a lot worse: 24 per cent were tenure line and 76 per cent contingent.

Increasingly marginalised, disenfranchised and excluded from faculty senates, adjuncts are given little say in university governance. They don't have the perks that come with tenure, such as academic freedom and job security.

At the University of Maine, where I am a professor in the English department, we are, unfortunately, following national trends: most courses are taught not by our 20 professors, but by our 29 part-time instructors and our 21 graduate teaching assistants.

Although pay scales vary for different institutions and different disciplines, most US universities have a similar two-tier system. Worker bees, who teach part-time, teach more but earn less than full-time faculty.

US universities have come to rely on this arrangement. According to a 2011 Pew Research Center survey, just 24 per cent of US college presidents said that if given a choice, they would prefer that most faculty at their institution be tenured. Although some of our adjuncts are the best teachers in the business, they may lack the expertise that comes with the PhD and years of training in their disciplines.

Administrators often obscure the high number of adjuncts, which has become a dirty secret. Their claims that almost 100 per cent of the faculty hold PhDs are often deceptive since the percentage usually applies to full-time faculty.

This confusion may be increased by adjuncts who refer to themselves as "professors", even though they usually hold the lower rank of lecturer or instructor. Students, parents, foundations and legislators are often unaware of these distinctions. Although this may seem harmless enough, if we allow such obfuscations and hiring practices to continue, we will end up getting the universities that administrators think we deserve.

By that time, we may not even notice that the emperor has no faculty.

From Where I Sit: "Worker Bees are doing more for less of the honey." *The Times Higher Education* 30 April 2015:18.
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