

BUSINESS


Why Does Academia Treat Its Workforce So Badly?

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A [piece on adjuncts](#) in Inside Higher Ed has been attracting a lot of attention among academics of my acquaintance. Its description of academic life is shockingly brutal--shocking even to me, who knows enough PhDs to be acquainted with the dismal facts:

When I began teaching at Columbia and Barnard in the 1960s, almost all the positions in their German departments were tenure-track. I came to SUNY New Paltz in the 70s, when there were only a couple of virtually silent and invisible part-time adjuncts among the 35 teachers in the entire Foreign Language Division. It was not until a few years after the dawn of the new millennium that I, like Rip Van Winkle, "awoke" after decades to a brand new reality: the number of tenure-track faculty in my department had shrunk to a mere 10, while some two dozen adjuncts were now teaching the bulk of our foreign language courses. Yikes!

As everyone in academe now knows, the professoriate has experienced a radical transformation over the past few decades. These enormous changes have occurred so gradually, however, that they are only now beginning to receive

attention. The general public has remained largely unaware of the staffing crisis in higher education. As contingent colleagues around the country came to outnumber the tenured faculty and as they were assigned an ever larger share of the curriculum, they became an inescapable fact of academic departmental life.

Nationally, adjuncts and contingent faculty -- we call them *ad-cons* -- include part-time/adjunct faculty; full-time, nontenure-track faculty; and graduate employees. Together these employees now make up an amazing 73 percent of the nearly 1.6 million-employee instructional workforce in higher education and teach over half of all undergraduate classes at public institutions of higher education.

Now, he's lumping together a bunch of different things: I don't really care if part timers and graduate students don't get paid much . . . at least as long as the graduate students are on track to better jobs. The core issue is full-time adjuncts, and whether the graduate students have a reasonable shot at a tenure-track position.

Unfortunately, the answer now is that they don't. Academia has bifurcated into two classes: tenured professors who are decently paid, have lifetime job security, and get to work on whatever strikes their fancy; and adjuncts who are paid at the poverty level and may labor for years in the desperate and often futile hope of landing a tenure track position. And, of course, graduate students, the number of whom may paradoxically increase as the number of tenure track jobs decreases--because someone has to teach all those intro classes.

I have long theorized that at least some of the leftward drift in academia can be explained by the fact that it has one of the most abusive labor markets in the world. I

theorize this because in interacting with many professors, I am bewildered by their beliefs about labor markets more generally; many seem to think of private labor markets as an endless well of exploitation where employees are virtual prisoners with no recourse in the face of horrific abuses. Yet this does not describe the low wage jobs in which I've worked--there were of course individuals who had to hold onto that particular job for idiosyncratic reasons, but as a class, low wage workers do not face the kind of monolithic employer power that a surprising number of academics seem to believe is common.

It is common, of course--in academia. Until they have tenure, faculty are virtual prisoners of their institution. Those on the tenure track work alongside a vast class of have-nots who are some of the worst-paid high school graduates in the country. So it's not surprising to me that this is how academics come to view labor markets--nor that they naturally assume that it must be *even worse* on the outside. And that's before we start talking about the marriages strained, the personal lives stunted, because those lucky enough to get a tenure-track job have to move to a random location, often one not particularly suited to their spouses' work ambitions or their own personal preferences . . . a location which, barring another job offer, they will have to spend the rest of their life in.

What puzzles me is how this job market persists, and is even worsening, in one of the most left-wing institutions in the country. I implore my conservative commenters not to jump straight into the generalizations about how this always happens in socialist countries; I'm genuinely curious. Almost every academic I know is committed to a pretty strongly left-wing vision of labor market institutions. Even if it's not their very first concern, one would assume that the collective preference should result in something much more egalitarian. So what's overriding that preference?
