

Leaving the Adjunct Track

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March 17, 2017

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Image by Joyce Hesselberth for The Chronicle Review

By Jill Carroll



I intend to never grade another paper.

At the height of my adjunct "career" teaching writing, world religions, and general humanities courses, I taught up to 12 courses a year at three different institutions in the Houston area. I juggled about 400 students a year in my courses, and each student wrote three to five papers. Do the math — that's a lot of grading.

I worked that oxymoronic full-time adjunct load for a decade — in addition to teaching a few continuing-ed courses just for kicks and extra income. In short, I taught more students and graded more papers in a decade than most of my full-time colleagues at the same university would teach in their entire careers.

For a while, I was sort of an adjunct guru. I self-published a book called *How to Survive as an Adjunct Lecturer: An Entrepreneurial Strategy Manual* and ended up writing a monthly advice column on The Adjunct Track for *The Chronicle*. I also provided coaching to other non-tenure-track instructors to help them figure out ways to work the system and squeeze as much money out of it as possible. The idea was to come as close as they could to an income that honored their knowledge and credentials — or to at least not have to wait tables on nonteaching days to make ends meet.

I did well financially. I made my mortgage every month and managed to save a little. But I shoveled my share of hate mail from people who said I was justifying an exploitative system when, really, all I was trying to do was find a way to survive (maybe even thrive for a few moments) within it.

Back then, there was talk of revolution, of course. Most of us, at least in the humanities, had read enough Marxist

critical theory in grad school to envision ourselves joining in some sort of massive collective uprising to overturn academe and force it to give us full-time jobs. Many of us would have settled for having our own desks, school email accounts, phones, photocopying privileges, and maybe free access to the campus health clinic: Adjuncts of the world unite! You have nothing to lose but the rolling briefcases you pull around in lieu of an office!

It seemed clear to me then — as it does now — no such revolution would take place. The market is still glutted with fresh Ph.D.s, especially in the humanities, who will accept adjunct positions just to stay in academe and not feel like they wasted their time and money on an expensive degree. I can't blame them. Even if a university's contingent faculty could manage to organize enough to collectively strike — a big "if" — the campus would shut down for a week or two, but soon would find plenty of replacements to staff the vacated positions.

Also, it seems to me that in our post-2008-recession era, adjuncting is now just another example of the gig economy. Adjuncts do short-term contract work alongside Uber drivers, Taskrabbit workers, and people who sell their skills on Fiverr. Increasingly more people are freelancers in America's late-stage capitalism. Fewer and fewer companies pay full-time salaries with the hefty benefits packages of even a decade or two ago. The country as a whole, it seems, has become more comfortable with — or at least resigned to — contingent employment models. I don't see that changing anytime soon. (Some folks unhappy with that state of affairs voted for President Trump. Somehow I don't see him changing it, either.)

For myself, I left adjunct teaching in 2004 when I was hired to a full-time position to help direct the Boniuk Center for Religious Tolerance at Rice University, where I had earned my doctorate in 1994 and taught as an adjunct. I held that full-time directorship for almost five years and then resigned. I've been out of academe and a full-time freelancer ever since.

I don't miss it. Sure, academe has its privileges and my university was, and remains, a truly nice place to work with lots of fantastic people. The schedule was flexible, especially compared to all the corporate professionals who work a rigid 60-to-80-hour week with two weeks of paid vacation a year. The students were, and still are, smart, fun, and engaging.

But I still don't miss it and I think I would have to be really desperate to go back into higher education, even as a full-time faculty or staff member. I am increasingly troubled by the upward-spiraling and stratospheric costs of a college education — especially at a time when a sizable majority of courses are taught by low-earning adjuncts and other contingent instructors.

I understand that facilities cost money — and large facilities and programs require more administrators to run them (at least that's the claim made by those asked to defend the dramatic increases in college tuition). I'm still troubled by it, and I'm glad I'm not working in higher education anymore. I don't want to have to twist myself into the contortions necessary to defend teaching at an institution that charges — and must itself justify charging — \$60,000 a year to students and their parents. And I sure as hell don't want to be an adjunct at such a place, earning mere pennies of that expensive price tag and being relegated to the lowest ranks of the professoriate.

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Because I have an entrepreneurial mind-set and my degree areas (world religions, philosophy of religion) have become interesting to people in the last 15 to 20 years, I've been able to translate my academic knowledge and credentials into a successful consulting career. I've done well providing global skills and religious diversity training for corporations, schools, and groups. And now, because of technological innovations, I can teach continuing-education courses online to people all over the world.

I'm currently teaching a 10-module world-religions course — offered by my own business, using an online platform

— that has 78 students in it. The course requires a fraction of the time it would take me to teach the same material in a university and, at the current price I'm charging for it, pays three times more than I would earn teaching it as an adjunct at a college or university. Moreover, I can teach anywhere I have my laptop and a fast Internet connection. Today's location is on the couch with my terriers napping on either side of me.

And because it's a course offered for enrichment, not college credit, there are no papers to grade.

So I'm good. I look back at my adjunct years and wonder how I managed to do it. It seems like another life. I get the occasional nice email or Facebook friend request from a former student, and the encounter takes me back to memories of that particular campus, at that specific time.

I remember vaguely the classroom conversations — the lively debates and dialogues we had over the ideas in the reading. I remember how much I learned, teaching on the periphery of my field and having to develop basic competency in areas that I'd only touched on in graduate school. I remember sitting in the workroom with other adjunct colleagues, talking over teaching strategies and helping each other navigate the labyrinthine systems of that particular campus — as opposed to the several others at which we also taught. I remember flying up and down the spaghetti freeways in this sprawling Texas city, trying to get to each campus on time.

They were good times. They were exhausting and frustrating times, too. I'm glad they are over.

Jill Carroll is a scholar, writer, and consultant in Houston. Her website is Jillcarroll.com.