

Review:

The Adjunct Underclass: How America's Colleges Betrayed Their Faculty, Their Students, and Their Mission

by Herb Childress

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To those outside of academia, college professors lead charmed lives. What's not to love with the Hollywood version of twelve-hour work weeks, six figure salaries, meaningful discussions of the mind, summers off, and even paid sabbaticals for pet projects? For those who toil in the trenches, teaching mandatory freshman composition and literature classes, the grim reality is quite different. According to recent data put out by New Faculty Majority, 75.5% of college faculty are contingent, meaning off the tenure track. That is 1.3 out of 1.8 million faculty members at large. And of that percentage, 50% are adjunct, which entails low pay, no medical benefits, and zero retirement contributions from the employer (New Faculty Majority 2019). It is not only unfair to the adjuncts, but also to the students and/or parents who are investing in someone spread woefully thin.

This growing trend, once heralded as higher education's dirty little secret, is skillfully and humanely examined by Herb Childress in his new book, *The Adjunct Underclass: How America's Colleges Betrayed Their Faculty, Their Students, and Their Mission*. As someone who has been there, working both sides of the fence (adjunct teaching and administrative duties), he discusses exploitative and unpredictable nature of part-time work. He states, "a life of contingency, like any life with an abusive partner, requires us to manufacture elaborate emotional defenses. We imagine that if we only do better, love will follow. We fear retribution, and so walk quietly" (162). Case in point? A few years back, adjuncts at East-West University, located in Chicago, were fired because they tried to unionize. The university claimed their contracts were simply not renewed, but the American Association of University Professors saw it quite differently, citing retaliation (Peter Schmidt 2010).

Therefore, it's an imperative read for graduate students entering the field of English, those trying to balance traditional pedagogies while teaching overloads, and others focusing on activism through unionization and/or striking. It would be of particular interest to tenure track professors, too, as once-secure lines are disappearing only to be replaced by adjuncts or instructors with less bargaining power to negotiate for a decent salary (Trevor Griffey 2017).

The book is broken down into eight chapters, ranging from the what the brochures don't tell you, to the stark reality foretold by Thomas Benton that we will not all land tenure tracks, to what to do if it doesn't pan out. In chapter one, he begins with the fairy tale of what most envision and then quickly delves into the everyday actualities: poverty-like wages, professors that sleep in their cars, freeway flyers (those who travel between multiple schools in hopes of improving job prospects and/or salaries), and the ever-popular psychic wage—the notion that we're called to the classroom for a higher purpose, so just keep giving until bled bone dry. This is where the cracks begin to form for many professors. Nicole, an adjunct hoping for a permanent faculty job and highlighted in his research states:

Getting part-time jobs are easy, but real jobs all go to people with political links within the departments. There's a real catch-22 for

publishing when you're an adjunct. You have to travel to do your research, to go to archives; you have to travel for conferences; but instead you take summer jobs. There's no time and no money to publish. I'm already middle-aged; I need to start functioning in a different world . . . My generation is being sacrificed, being crucified for decisions made by others. (8-9)

Some colleges pay as little as \$1,500-\$1,900 per course, and many institutions cap adjuncts at a certain number, so they don't have to allocate benefits. Academic conferences, on average, run about \$1,000 when all is said and done (conference fee, air travel, transportation, hotel, food, and so on). Therefore, it's nearly impossible to build a strong curriculum vitae and teach as an adjunct simultaneously. This is just one of the many dilemmas part-timers endure on a continual basis because the structure is deeply rooted in mistreatment. Many critics have claimed that academia, especially in the humanities, eats its young because one can do everything right and still come up short in the end.

As the book progresses, Childress states in chapters four through seven that the hiring landscape seemingly changed overnight, or at least in one working generation. In the 1970s, it was 75% tenure track and 25% adjunct, using them more for emergencies or a stopgap measure. Now, that ratio has completely inverted, and the academy has shifted to a corporate, WalMart-like model of discarding the workforce and reducing labor costs in slimy-yet-creative ways. They include:

1. Fewer people, longer hours.
2. Workers redefined as independent contractors.
3. De-bundled professional activities and the creation of paraprofessionals.
4. Outsourced non-core functions.
5. Replacement of humans and space with technology. (119-121)

Individually and collectively, these proposals are good for business but not for the average John Doe worker. The question that could be asked by many is—why? Why even do this type of work knowing

you (the adjunct) are going to get screwed over repeatedly and mistreated by administrations? Why not fight back like the people of Puerto Rico (who recently flooded the streets and protested on highways against decades of corruption, recession, and a debt crisis) in opposition of their Governor Ricardo Rosselló (Wynn Davis 2019)? Surely adjuncts can do the same on a smaller scale and storm the president's office, right? It should be noted that this is asked a lot by those unfamiliar with ivory tower politics, and Childress hits the nail on the head.

In a nutshell, adjuncts never come in a one-size-fits-all box, which works in higher education's favor more often than not. Childress states, "the higher-education community at large points to a different quadrant, the 'causal learners'" (126). Who are these people? They include the retired professor that likes to teach his favorite course for kicks and giggles, the attorney who lectures about property law one night a week, the creative writer dabbling in poetry that is financially supported by her partner, the new mom who just wants to get out of the house on Saturday, and so on (126). Why? "Because it's just so darn much fun!" (126). While there is nothing wrong with these educators, that mindset fails to consider the emergent category of those who are often floundering, specifically young graduate students, instructors at non-unionized/private institutions, women, and minorities, which makes organizing and striking more difficult. Rocking the boat or questioning the current status quo could lead to termination.

Thomas Benton also famously warned students about this predicament in his infamous essay "So You Want to Go to Graduate School?" in 2003. He later stated:

It's hard to tell young people that universities recognize that their idealism and energy—and lack of information—are an exploitable resource. For universities, the impact of graduate programs on the lives of those students is an acceptable externality, like dumping toxins into a river. If you cannot find a tenure-track position, your university will no longer court you; it will pretend you do not exist and will act as if your unemployability is entirely your fault. It will make you feel ashamed, and you will probably

just disappear, convinced it's right rather than that the game was rigged from the beginning. (Thomas Benton 2009)

Childress himself left the educational arena altogether in 2013 to partner with an ethnography-based consulting firm, but he still mentions the internal conflict, stating, "part of me still wants it. That kind of faith is in my bones, and reason can only bleach it away somewhat. The imprint is still there, faint, hauntingly imprecise, all the more venerable for its openness to dreams" (163). It's a theme woven throughout the book because everyone wants the brass ring (tenure track line), but only a minority will obtain it.

In his final chapter, Childress advises contemplation, having gone through the head vs. heart struggle mentioned above from personal experiences and those he interviewed. The good ol' days of working at a university with a livable wage and benefits are long gone for a vast majority of professors, especially in the humanities. He gives realistic recommendations for undergraduate students and their families, prospective graduate students, and colleges and their management. He reminds all of us that "relationships are everything," and "the faculty is the college" (148-150).

Because Herb Childress knows the intricacies of academia and not the glossy Hollywood version that is so often portrayed, he writes with authority and clarity. Additionally, he perfectly captures all the mixed messages of being an adjunct professor (hope vs. despair, joy vs. regret, and enthusiasm vs. burnout) while backing up the narratives with current quantitative research. It's a shame that we lose professors like this over and over again. However, his experience will help and perhaps more importantly, warn, others pursuing this broken-down system of exploitation.

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