

Survival kit for part-time faculty*

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Note: The following article appeared in the October 21, 1981, issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* under the title "Six rules for survival for adjunct professors." The editors of *WPA* sought permission to reprint it for two reasons. First, as a follow-up to *WPA*'s Fall, 1981, issue devoted to the plight of part-time faculty, Professor Gaus's essay reminds us that we face a long-term, chronic problem, one that cannot be solved overnight. And second, the editors felt that the article could help WPAs, and others responsible for hiring adjunct faculty, to help part-timers help themselves.

According to articles in various newspapers recently, the number of jobs available for college and university professors will decrease by something like 14 percent during the coming decade. Nevertheless, more doctoral degrees are being awarded than ever before, and many new Ph.D.s are already having a hard time finding work. Some of them have chosen the security of a job—any job—but many others are choosing to teach part time as adjunct professors.

The situation in many institutions of higher education today demands the use of large numbers of adjuncts. Time was when the hiring of more than three or four would have been the cause of united faculty protest; but times change. Colleges and universities are no longer in a position to take on more tenure-track faculty members—many are fighting for their very existence, many can barely cover current expenses, many are waiting for the trends in budgets and enrollments to become more firmly established.

So adjunct positions exist for those who want them, and there are growing numbers of qualified Ph.D.s available to fill them. Many adjuncts are taking advantage of this limited opportunity for one or more of the following reasons:

- They have important information and a unique perspective to impart to students and faculty members.
- They would rather do what they spent years preparing to do, even on the fringe of academe.
- The only route to a full-time, tenure-track position runs through institutions of higher education.
- They can survive on an adjunct's salary.

For any or all of these reasons, and others unique to individual cases, adjunct professors are, and will continue to be, available to serve the needs of colleges and

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universities. In order to maximize the benefits and minimize the frustrations involved in this partnership, the following rules for adjuncts are offered. They are not offered satirically, but are based on the practical realities of the situation—or at least on my own rather extensive experience. They may appear to be a matter of common sense, but to the graduate-student-turned-adjunct, the intricacies of survival may not be readily apparent.

The post of adjunct is an ambiguous one—a place on the faculty without the security, the rights, or the responsibilities of such a position—by definition temporary and insecure. But rights and responsibilities can often be defined by the jobholder. Where this is impossible, it is important to find out where the boundaries are. There are six specific rules for survival:

- 1. Get everything to which your position entitles you** is the master rule, to which the next five—in no particular order—are subordinate.
- 2. Don't count your courses until registration is completed.** As a new semester approaches, deans and department chairpersons find out that they cannot cover all scheduled desirable sections without adjunct—specifically, your—assistance. Accept all offers! Make sure, of course, that none overlap, but accept up to five or six if you get the chance. Adjuncts are often scheduled for sections with doubtful enrollments, and sometimes full-time faculty are assigned “your” course when theirs turns out at the last minute to be under-enrolled.
- 3. Make yours the best course in the institution.** An adjunct doesn't have committee or advising responsibilities, and the time saved should be used to develop the best possible course. Deans will only write excellent recommendations if they have excellent reports about your teaching, and one source is a class of enthusiastic students.
- 4. Establish salary and method and date of payment.** Professionals often feel it is undignified to discuss such matters. The fact is, there is a fine line for the adjunct between dignity and stupidity. Some institutions pay only salary—so much per three-credit course. It is possible, however, that negotiation will produce expense money as well, especially if the adjunct is teaching at an off-campus location. Often, checks must be picked up at the payroll office on certain days at certain hours. Payday for the adjunct who is uninformed on such matters may never arrive.
- 5. Establish your benefits (if any) before beginning the term.** A secretary is often assigned to type and duplicate materials for adjuncts. Find out—there's no point hovering over a hot copying machine if someone is being paid to do it for you. It is useful to know if mailboxes are assigned to adjuncts, where they are, and whether institutional letterhead is available for your use. But more important than just a mailing address is a *reliable* mailing address, one where there is someone to forward material or at least report its arrival. Temporary office space may be available to the adjunct brave enough to request it. Also, it is sometimes possible to participate in a retirement plan if you are prepared to make payments into it.
- 6. Be prepared for frustration.** Secretaries will unwittingly tell you that under no circumstances will they type anything for you because you aren't a “real” faculty

member. Bills will outstrip income. Nondeductible gasoline prices will rise while your salary will not. Your classes will be held late in the evening, on Fridays, and on weekends—and some will be canceled after you have spent hours preparing for them. No one will care about, much less support, your research efforts. You will see precious little of your family.

But the adjunct who can successfully maneuver that obstacle course, by getting and giving the maximum, can legitimately feel proud of the accomplishment, and will have nothing to fear from the politics involved in a full-time position.