

Living at the bottom*

Susan Blank and Beth Greenberg

"When people ask me what I do, I say I teach English at CUNY. And then I quickly add, 'but I'm only an adjunct.' Sometimes they say, 'What's that?', and I answer, 'Oh, sort of a part-time graduate assistant.' But that doesn't really explain it. It's much more complicated."

We are adjuncts at the City University of New York. Although we have the same academic qualifications as many full-time teachers, we are part-time (and technically limited by the rules of the university to part-time work), paid by the hour, and hired or fired semester by semester. No matter how long we remain in the system as adjuncts, we have no possibility of tenure. Usually our pay-scale is roughly one-half the salary for two-thirds the work of a full-timer of the lowest rank, and this discrepancy is widened by the fact that we have no benefits or Social Security.

To us, teaching as CUNY adjuncts means begin caught in a series of contradictions, each one prickly and confining and ultimately exploitative. What follows are a few of those contradictions, in the form of personal anecdotes we have collected from adjunct lecturers teaching at CUNY.

There are union rules to protect me against exploitation; they keep me underemployed by making it illegal for me to get enough work.

"I make \$6,000 per year teaching two courses each semester. Proportionately, if I taught four courses, I could make \$12,000, which I could afford to live on. But according to the union contract, I am limited to teaching nine hours per semester (or two courses, whichever is less). If I teach more, I am no longer part-time and am officially being underpaid and deprived of benefits as a full-time teacher."

In contrast to the adjunct, the full-time CUNY teacher is allowed to teach one extra course to make more money:

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As originally published, this article was accompanied by another, "Organizing from the Bottom Up." That article describes an unsuccessful effort to unionize part-time faculty at CUNY. Readers interested in collective action in support of part-time faculty may find the article helpful and interesting.

"Last week I began teaching one of my new courses. I was very pleased to meet an old colleague from another campus. At the same time, I couldn't help feeling a measure of resentment. This course is one of the two that I'm allowed to teach. Teaching the same courses with the very same qualifications as I have, he, as a full-timer, is making perhaps \$17,000 a year to my \$6,000. I can only conclude that his course should be offered to an adjunct as a third course rather than provide extra income to someone already making a full-time salary."

Teaching is a "profession," but in many ways I'm like a migrant worker.

"When I've built up a good relationship with a class, and students ask me if they can take a course with me next semester, I say I don't even know if I'll be teaching at this institution next semester."

"I'm always tempted to accept more courses than I can handle in the fall, for fear of not finding work in the spring. One year I was offered classes at five schools, another year, at four. I always accepted work at just two different schools until recently when I tried working at three. Never again."

"Fall semester I worked at two schools. In November, one of those schools told me I was among the lucky ones who would be rehired in the spring. I would teach two three-hour classes. During intersession, I planned the classes, chose texts, and got thoroughly excited about meeting my new students. Four days before the new term began, the other school offered me two four-hour classes. Although the two extra hours would have meant more money, I decided to stick with the first school, where I had really enjoyed the creative atmosphere and the interaction between adjuncts and full-timers. The day before classes began, I received a phone call saying that due to low registration, my six hours had been cancelled. The caller's warmth and words of sympathy helped little. I quickly called the second school, but, of course, the two classes they'd offered me were already covered."

"Largely because many departments have so many adjuncts hired at the last minute, books are often chosen for us. I walk into a school one or two days before classes begin and am handed several books I'm unfamiliar with. The fact that I could function more effectively with my own preferred texts makes no difference. Each school has its particular philosophy of teaching, also. What I've done with success at one school might be entirely inappropriate at another. As soon as I know where I'm going to teach, I begin to psyche out the department. Although I'm rarely told that I'm expected to teach in a certain way, it usually comes out in the observation report if I don't. And that makes it difficult to be rehired."

"Although most of us are very dedicated, the fact is that we are not usually able to perform all those duties associated with college teaching. For example, if a student can't meet me right before or after class, it may be impossible to schedule conferences, because when the student is free, I may be traveling to, or teaching at, another school. I feel fortunate when I meet a student on the way to the train and have a little while to talk. So many student problems spill forth during these accidental meetings, problems that are often remedied as a result of our talk."

"Because of the difficulty locating me, I give my students my home telephone number. I'm not thrilled with the idea, but many students have found it useful, and so far no one has abused the privilege. Some of my colleagues have been less

lucky and have had to discontinue the practice, leaving their students at times stranded."

"When I was a full-time instructor, before I got axed in the budget cuts, I would consider it my job to see as many students for as many hours as possible. Now that I'm an adjunct, I still hold conferences, but basically, if the students can't make it during the days I'm out there, we just don't meet. I'm part-time, not full-time. Of course, they are exactly the same kind of students with exactly the same needs for remediation as the students I taught as a full-time instructor. Students lose out with part-time teachers."

Teaching should mean working with other people, but I feel alone.

"It is rare that I find time to talk to a colleague. One of us is always rushing to another school at the other end of the city, or in Westchester or New Jersey. Or there's something to straighten out with a secretary, or to type and duplicate. Of course, with people working part-time, schedules often don't coincide at all."

"Whenever a friendship manages to grow, it is almost certain to be uprooted the next term. The chances of being in the same school again and having overlapping schedules are remote."

"Last semester I was delighted to have an office, rare for an adjunct. When I saw a notice on the wall addressed to 'Dear Fellow Wage Slaves,' I felt less isolated than usual, more supported. I do enjoy the conversations about shared inequities with the other adjuncts in the office, but after a while, I have noticed that the contact itself isn't enough. Talking helps, but I want change."

If I do a responsible teacher's work, I'm working for free.

At an English department meeting at a CUNY community college, the staff is rather small, informal, and young. Most significantly, well over half its members are adjuncts. Some of the full-time members have doctorates, some are still in graduate school, all of them are committed teachers. The adjuncts can be described in exactly the same terms. As far as one can tell, the only difference between the two groups is who happened to be in the right position at the right time to get a full-time job.

The department chairperson is sensitive to the situation. "We depend on our adjuncts," she says frequently. Unlike many other CUNY departments, this one encourages adjunct participation on committees, in curriculum decision making. Nevertheless, in its second semester this department did not rehire 20 of the adjuncts who worked there in the first semester. This was in no way the fault of the chairperson. The system dictates that she retain only enough adjuncts to "fill the sections." Still, this faculty meeting is over half-filled with teachers uncertain if they will be working here six months hence. And the chairperson isn't sure either.

Now an adjunct raises a question. "I keep hearing about this grant and that committee. Couldn't the department inform adjuncts about these activities?" Several people nod and feelings of exclusion quietly fill the room. The reply is swift and diplomatic. Certainly, notices of departmental activities will be distributed to adjuncts. The tension in the room releases.

The next day, however, several adjuncts tell each other, "I'm not going to any more of the damn meetings. Why should I care what the full-timers are doing?" "People just go because they figure it looks good for getting rehired."

On the one hand, we are professional teachers and feel slighted when excluded from professional duties. On the other, we are hourly workers and feel exploited when we are asked to perform these duties for no pay. Similarly, the chairperson is caught—accused of snobbishness when ignoring adjuncts, and of exploitation when involving them. Technically she must disregard extra-class activities when rehiring, but if she does, she ignores substantial effort. Of course, when adjuncts sense that extra duties will be considered, they feel constrained to volunteer. Clearly goodwill and personal solutions will not eliminate these traps.

I see myself as a potential assistant professor, but in fact my apprenticeship may last forever.

There are very few—in CUNY, virtually no—full-time jobs to be had. That's the situation. But no one is ever going to demand change until adjuncts really understand that adjuncting, *not* full-time work, is the job they have.

Almost all adjuncts see themselves as on the way to someplace else. And there are elements of the system that encourage this view. Possession of, or progress towards, a doctorate is a consideration when an adjunct is hired. Some schools even conduct a kind of mini-oral during job interviews.

These standards, however, are the style and not the substance of the adjunct's reality. Rather than apprentice scholars, adjuncts are often the drudges who do more than their share of the menial work of teaching.

Very infrequently (and less so in CUNY now that the budget cuts have hit), a full-time position does become available. What adjuncts are beginning to understand is that such a full-time instructorship has increasingly become a job for a "double adjunct." These newly appointed instructors teach four to five courses—mainly introductory. In English departments these are usually all composition courses, an impossible paper load. A much sought-after instructorship at Hunter College this year demanded a course load of five composition courses (read, comment on, and grade 125 papers a week).

The positions of these instructors are almost as tenuous as those of the adjuncts. Many were retrenched in last August's budget cuts, only to be replaced by adjuncts; frequently instructors replaced *themselves* as adjuncts.

Most adjuncts and even instructors know that they are the menial workers of the university system. But our vision is clouded by a double image. The person who fills out an hourly time sheet and who may be laid off tomorrow if registration dips, may also, with a few lucky breaks, be an apprentice scholar on the verge of security, tenure, and advanced courses. Until we get a clear, single image of the reality of our position, we will be immobilized by contradictions.