

## The case of the migrant workers

*Donald McQuade*

The migrant workers in the groves of academe are the uncounted legions of part-time teachers who travel from one college to another—by chance, instinct, or plan—in search of work. Their résumés may seem all too familiar to most writing program administrators, especially WPAs responsible for staffing an ever-increasing number of composition sections with an ever-decreasing budget. More specifically, most English departments regard their part-time teachers, unlike their graduate assistants, as transients, as academic drifters hired to teach composition on an hourly or per-credit basis for one semester. But this essay is intended to be neither a “case for” nor a “case against” part-time teachers in writing programs—at least not on economic or even on ethical grounds. My purposes, instead, are decidedly more professional, if not entirely practical: to describe as accurately as possible the circumstances that part-time teachers of writing encounter in their work; to help clarify the issues that attend their presence in large numbers in English departments across the country; and to offer a realistic, achievable set of directions for leading our profession toward a more reasoned discussion of, if not resolution to this problem.

Many writing program administrators are aware of the recent AAUP study that reported that 70 percent of all part-time faculty regard their college teaching as *supplemental* income.<sup>1</sup> This may well be true for our colleagues in biology, chemistry, engineering, psychology, and even in some of the social sciences. Such part-time faculty may teach for any number of personal and professional reasons, including securing a visible sign of academic certification, earning additional discretionary income, or perhaps even as a way of forcing themselves to keep abreast of the research in their fields. Many writing program administrators recognize, too, that some part-time faculty have no interest in teaching full-time. But the 70 percent figure cited in the AAUP study hardly applies to part-time teachers of college English. I would venture to say that most of the remaining 30 percent who rely on part-time teaching as their *sole* means of support work in English departments.

I would also like to call attention to yet another set of faces on the road these days, competing, in effect, for what may, at first, seem like a slightly more humane form of academic part-time employment. We should include in any discussion of part-time faculty all those instructors scrambling to fill the swelling ranks of short-term, nontenure-track appointments posted in the *MLA Job Information List*. We need do no more than glance through that listing to discover just how widespread such “full-time, one-year, temporary positions” actually are. In every sense but one, these colleagues are also part-time teachers. They, too, are migrant workers.

Maintaining technical distinctions between part-time and nontenure-track, full-time faculty may help administrators balance departmental budgets, but such distinctions also remind us of how easy it is to obfuscate the issues that set the conditions for either type of appointment. Although one group teaches a full load of courses at a single institution, both groups are temporary workers. In both cases, these teachers are painfully aware that their appointments are short-term, and that although they are contractually members of an academic department, they will rarely, if ever, be considered full-fledged colleagues. Accordingly, a commitment to accuracy would demand that we abandon the distinction between part-time and temporary full-time teachers of English and call both groups "short-termers." But the echoes of that phrase would not strike most of us as particularly appealing. And on further reflection that designation also leaves too much to be accounted for. We need only remind ourselves that most of these "short-termers" continue to teach for years, although they do so by drifting almost randomly from one campus to the next.

Still another category of migrant academic labor is faculty wives—said to be otherwise unemployable—playing the proverbial role of maidservants, catering to the interests of their full-time colleagues both in what they are given to teach and in how they are expected to entertain at faculty social gatherings. Surely, such women are not short-term teachers of English. Yet just as certainly they are imperiously granted few opportunities to be little more than part-timers. But in whose eyes—in whose terms—are they "part-timers?" Surely not their own.

We need a far more precise and respectful vocabulary to describe the professional circumstances of these part-time colleagues. And when we look more closely at the patterns evident in their careers as part-timers, and in their daily schedules, we can see more clearly the breadth and depth of the professional issues facing these teachers and the departments that hire them. The following are two cases.

Adjunct "A" is married and is the father of two children. His wife works. He does too—all the while chipping away, however slowly, at his Ph.D., which he finally completed this year. This semester he is teaching, as he has done for the past four years, two courses at each of four different colleges in the New York metropolitan area. His eight courses a semester usually include a highly unbalanced mixture of basic writing and introductory literature classes. With four summer courses thrown in adjunct "A" averages a staggering total of 20 courses a year. This man teaches more courses in one year than most professional people teach in three years. Consider all the opportunities he has to grade papers, hold conferences, and generally improve his craft. I have observed him teach, and I can testify that his students benefit enormously from his wealth of experience. He is first-rate—a master teacher at a relatively young age. He cannot match my years in college teaching but I cannot match his classroom experience. I am not embarrassed about that, nor is he. We both have families we help to support.

In a good year, his 20 adjunct courses gross him roughly \$30,000 a year. That is certainly excellent pay for a part-time teacher who, as a short-termer, has taught more than the equivalent of three full-time years to earn that \$30,000. At one college, he makes approximately \$1,900, before taxes, for each composition course; at another, he earns \$1,000 to teach the same course, up from \$900 last term when

he got his Ph.D. and could enter the "real" job market. During each of the years he has taught, he put roughly 25,000 miles on his car, literally speeding to and from four campuses. His first class started at 8:30 a.m.; his last class ended at 10:30 p.m. But that was only twice a week. The other nights, he finished at 8:00 p.m. He teaches and earns more as an adjunct than anyone else I have ever known—or perhaps would ever care to meet. He is a top-of-the-line adjunct much in demand at many colleges, but as a part-timer. His dissertation defended, he now faces the challenge of a full-time appointment: teaching four courses a semester. No doubt he will succeed; and with only two additional part-time courses, "A" will have what, for him, will be an appreciable amount of free time to devote to publishing.

Consider a second case. The salary and teaching schedules of adjunct "B" are more representative, nationally, of part-time faculty in English. "B" is also working on his Ph.D., but given what he knows of the job market, "B" feels no special urgency about finishing it. He averages two composition courses a semester, earns \$900 for each of them, and survives with the aid of food stamps. He never knows until the last minute exactly where and what he'll be teaching—or even if he will be hired at all. His brand of teaching may also be labeled part-time by the department that hires him, but for him it surely is not. Teaching occupies him full-time. In some respects, it is all he has.

These two cases are admittedly extremes of the adjunct problem most English departments now face. Two clear pieces of evidence suggest, however, that their cases are representative of the professional prospects of part-time faculty in English. First, there is at present no shortage of Ph.D.s in English. Second, adjunct faculty are the most "cost-effective" means to teach composition. Most often, hiring adjunct faculty is simply an accounting decision, not a professional decision based on clearly defined standards of how these part-timers should be selected, trained, and integrated into the intellectual communities of the college or the English department.

The overwhelming evidence makes it clear that adjunct faculty are granted few opportunities to think of themselves in professional terms. Most remain isolated. Here is but a sampling of the separations that distinguish "them" from "us." At most colleges, adjunct faculty are denied a proportionate share of basic health insurance, or even the time to recover from an illness. At many colleges, adjuncts, unlike full-time faculty, are required to make up the classes they miss. Adjuncts are rarely, if ever, granted paid leaves, despite literally years of consecutive service in many cases. Only a few colleges award research funds and travel grants to adjuncts. Curiously, most of the departments in which they serve require adjuncts to attend staff meetings but deny them a franchise. More generally, their participation in departmental decisions and governance, if it exists at all, is restricted to nonessential matters. Fundamentally, however, the personal and professional dignities we expect are all too infrequently extended to adjunct colleagues by our departments. Many colleges do not extend to part-time faculty such routine professional courtesies as adequate office space or, in some cases, even mailboxes with departmental memos about the courses they are teaching. Adjuncts are often casually bumped from one course to another to accommodate full-time faculty whose electives have failed to register. And adjuncts always stand last in line

when it comes to simple clerical assistance. They are paid, unlike their full-time colleagues, at the college's convenience—usually C.O.D.—and often without any provision for increments or merit raises.

Compressing the range of the abuses of part-time faculty as I have done highlights, I trust, their collective poor lot. But I also feel obliged to underscore the obvious: not all of these forms of professional exploitation occur regularly on every campus. Enough of these abuses do exist at enough colleges, however, to warrant our most serious consideration, as well as that of our colleagues and our professional organizations. We must begin to respond to the professional needs of our part-time colleagues.

Yet I do not intend this essay to be converted into a basic text for a union hall revival meeting. Nor can we treat adjunct faculty—as most colleges and unions now do—principally as a labor issue. To do so would be to ignore the larger, and yet more profound, intellectual and pedagogical implications of the increasing presence of part-time faculty in English departments. And if colleges exist primarily to respond to the needs of students, then it is entirely appropriate, and in fact long overdue, that such professional organizations as the Council of Writing Program Administrators, the Association of Departments of English, the Conference on College Composition and Communication, the American Association of University Professors, and the Association of American Colleges (the national alliance of deans, provosts, and college presidents) rigorously examine the “costs”—in every sense of that word—of the increasing use of adjunct faculty in teaching college English.

I would like to propose that a national task force be established to synthesize fully what are now rather disparate, if not entirely isolated and fragmented, efforts to explore, define, and refine the complex web of issues related to employing part-time faculty in English departments.<sup>1</sup> The list of specific charges to the task force needs to be worked out in considerable detail, but let me note at least a few of the more obvious tasks that this group might undertake.

1. It could document the number of part-time faculty and graduate teaching assistants currently teaching in English departments. We need, for example, definitive information on the current and former percentages of part- and full-time departmental appointments. We also need to chart the changes in these proportions. Five years ago in my department, for example, we employed 65 graduate teaching assistants and virtually no adjuncts. We now have 23 graduate teaching assistants and nearly 50 adjuncts. We also need to consider the extent to which such shifts are consistent with the decline of Ph.D. students in English.

2. It could gather hard information on the number of temporary, nontenure-track, full-time positions. What percentage of these appointments are slated as replacements for senior faculty on leave? What are the nature and the number of teaching assignments for temporary faculty?

3. It could collect reliable data on the professional status of part-time and temporary full-time faculty and, in effect, get a better bearing on the extent of the rights, privileges, and fringe benefits granted them and the restraints and indignities they must endure.

4. It could convert impressions into facts. How effective are part-time and temporary teachers of writing? Are they more or less effective than their full-time, tenure-track colleagues? What, for example, is the extent of part-timers' professional training? Are the goals they set for themselves as teachers of writing consistent with those of their senior colleagues? How can writing program administrators maintain instructional excellence with so many underpaid, professionally isolated, part-time faculty? How can part-time faculty be trained on-the-job in a time of shrinking budgets?

5. It could develop and publicize reasonable and specific criteria for hiring part-time teachers of writing and consider more carefully their professional development. What, for example, are the consequences of little or no variety in course assignments? What are the best ways to reward excellence in teaching for part-time faculty? How, specifically, can part-time faculty be encouraged to strengthen their knowledge of composition theory, research, and pedagogy? Or, to return for a moment to my two cases of migrant workers: As a writing program administrator, whom would you rather hire, adjunct “A” or adjunct “B”?

6. It could clarify the relation, if any, between part-time faculty and projected enrollments in English department elective courses. To my knowledge, we have yet to assess the impact of adjunct faculty on either the number of English majors or on Ph.D. programs in English. What, in effect, are the long-range consequences on our discipline of the presence of more and more underpaid and frequently dispirited part-time faculty teaching more and more composition classes?

7. It could draft specific guidelines on the responsibilities, if any, of part-time faculty to the English department—and more particularly the writing program—beyond their work in the classroom.

8. It could determine, at least provisionally, what voice part-time faculty should be given in policy decisions as they affect the writing program or the broader range of issues facing English departments.

9. It could estimate the contributions that English departments can reasonably expect part-time teachers to make toward reinforcing the sense of a college as a spirited community of intellectual inquiry. How can part-time faculty be fully integrated into the professional life of the college?

10. It could weigh carefully the special benefits and liabilities of bringing English departments into line with other departments by drawing more of their part-time teachers from the business world by tapping the skills of those who would, like the part-timers in other disciplines, regard their teaching as a source of supplemental income. There are many professionals “out there”—and more now than ever before with Ph.D.s in English—who earn their livings working with words and who would welcome an invitation to return to the academy. In this respect, the part-time faculty problem might also prove to be an opportunity, at least as a prospect for broadening everyone's sense of the meaning of intellectual community.

These are but a few of the needs, issues, and questions the proposed task force

could address. Other issues, no doubt, would suggest themselves during the course of the group's work. Subcommittees could be formed, with additional colleagues involved at that level, to explore reasonable, dignified, and cost-effective solutions to each major aspect of the part-time faculty problem. Based on information gathered and recommendations made, this task force could follow up on its report by initiating and coordinating pilot projects to test potential solutions to the problems targeted.

Adequate funding would be required to complete the requisite research, conduct the appropriate regional hearings, draft the specific recommendations and underwrite the cost of the pilot projects. To that end, I call on the presidents of the Council of Writing Program Administrators, the American Association of University Professors, the Association of American Colleges, the Association of Departments of English, and the Conference on College Composition and Communication to appoint a representative of each organization—along with adequate representation from the ranks of part-time faculty—to explore areas of mutual concern on the part-time faculty issue, with an eye toward drafting a preliminary proposal for submission to such federal agencies as the National Institute of Education or the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education, or even the Department of Labor. Private funding sources ought also to be explored.

The work of such a task force must begin soon. The ranks of part-time and temporary full-time faculty grow larger each semester. And a concerted professional response is the best way to understand and solve an increasingly complex problem. Yet listening to the exchanges in the meeting rooms and corridors of convention halls makes it abundantly, and all too painfully, clear just how fragmented we are professionally. The prospect of this proposal is that it can serve as one professional way to reinvigorate, and perhaps even to help restore, that fragile sense of intellectual community within a discipline that seems more splintered now than ever before. As I see it, the alternative—at least metaphorically—is that we may *all* wind up as part-time teachers of English.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Howard P. Tuckman, William D. Vogler, and Jaime Caldwell, *Part-Time Faculty Series* (Washington, D.C.: AAUP, 1978), as quoted in Carol Simpson Stern, Jesse H. Choper, Mary W. Gray, and Robert J. Wolfson, "The Status of Part-Time Faculty," *Academe*, 67 (February-March, 1981), 31.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the AAUP reports cited above. The executive committee of the Conference on College Composition and Communication has authorized a subcommittee to study the working conditions of part-time teachers of writing, and the Association of Departments of English has recently created an ad hoc committee on the same subject. In addition, the Council of Writing Program Administrators has established a commission on part-time teachers. (See Ben McClelland's report on WPA's preliminary findings in this issue.)