

I am not exploited

James M. Tackach

Editor's Note. The following article on part-time teaching is one of a series published by *WPA* beginning with the Fall, 1981, issue (Volume 5, Number 1)- That issue, including articles by Susan Blank and Beth Greenberg, Wayne C. Booth, Ben W. McClelland, Donald A. MacQuade, and Geoffrey S. Weinman, was devoted entirely to problems raised by hiring part-time faculty to teach in writing programs. The Spring issue of *WPA* (Volume 5, Number 3) continued this discussion with an article by Paula J. Gaus that suggested ways part-time faculty themselves might deal with the conditions they face. In the present issue, Mr. Tackach expresses a point of view quite different from any of those expressed earlier in this series. We are happy to be able to present the many sides of this debate on a topic that is of such crucial importance to our profession.

Much has been written in the past few years about the position of part-time faculty members in the academic environment, and most studies have come to the same conclusion: part-time faculty members are overworked, underpaid, and greatly exploited.

The articles in the Fall, 1981, issue of *WPA* made similar statements about the plight of part-timers. Susan Blank and Beth Greenberg, both former part-time composition instructors, referred to their years of part-timing as "living at the bottom." Donald McQuade called part-timers "migrant workers,"² and Wayne C. Booth claimed that the increased use of part-time instructors is "the major scandal in higher education today." Articles in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Academe* have made the same point.

I am typical of many of the part-time instructors discussed in these articles. In May, 1978, I received a master's degree in English from the University of Rhode Island. Not being able to land a full-time job but still wanting to stay in the teaching profession, I strung together a course or two at two or three different schools and made a living. Last September, I enrolled in a Ph.D. program, but I remained teaching parttime.

But there is one difference between the part-timers discussed in these recent articles and me: I do not consider myself exploited. I am not "living at the bottom." I have very little in common with migrant workers. And I do not consider the increased use of part-time instructors "the major scandal in higher education today."

Before I discuss the reasons I hold this opinion, I think it wise to consider our use of a term like "exploited" in reference to part-time college instructors. I have always heard the expression "exploited worker" used to discuss the plight of migrant farm workers or nineteenth-century coal miners and sweatshops workers. These were

workers who had little or no education and who could not leave their jobs to get something better. They worked long hours under miserable conditions, and their low salaries guaranteed that their after-work lives were almost as miserable. They got home from the mines or factories after dark, they had little to eat, and they lived in slum conditions.

Is it accurate, therefore, to use a term like "exploited" to refer to today's part-time college instructors? I do not think so. First of all, all are highly educated and should they choose to do so, they could find gainful employment in careers other than teaching. I have met many people with liberal arts M. A. degrees and Ph.D. degrees who are now happily and productively employed as editors, computer programmers, technical writers, sales representatives, and researchers. Many universities offer programs to retool academicians for work in other fields, and many of these programs have been very successful in placing scholars in worthwhile jobs. Therefore, it seems obvious that most part-time college instructors remain in the profession by choice.⁴ Compare these people to a group of truly exploited workers-migrant farm workers who know that they will have to work under the same conditions until they die. Moreover, the working conditions of part-time instructors are actually quite bearable. Most have (or at least share) offices in well-heated buildings and most have flexible teaching schedules that require them to be at school for, at most, fifteen to twenty hours a week. Exploitation? Hardly.

My situation is evidence. Last year, teaching part-time at two colleges and one business, I earned \$11,800. I worked about thirty-five hours a week for thirty weeks (two semesters) and about twenty-five hours a week for six weeks (one summer session). That means that I had sixteen weeks off-four months'. A salary for eight months' work of \$11,800 can hardly be considered slave wages.

My friends who took entry-level positions in the business world after graduating do not make much more than I do when we consider the number of hours that we work. One friend recently took a job with a big-eight accounting firm; his starting salary was \$14,000. Another began as a technical writer for \$13,500. One took an administrative position with a large New York bank at \$18,000. These are entry-level positions, and the salaries will rise more quickly than mine, but these people work forty-five or fifty hours a week for fifty weeks a year; many of them envy me.

There is, of course, always the problem of a lack of benefits. My friends in the business world have their salaries supplemented with benefit packages that include health insurance, life insurance, and retirement plans. But such benefits as life insurance and retirement plans are not of vital importance to a person unless he or she plans to stay at the same job for many years; most of us who teach part-time probably will land full-time jobs eventually, in or out of the teaching profession, that will provide us with these long-range benefits. As for health insurance, most married parttimers can be included in their spouse's health plan if their spouse has full-time employment. And some colleges allow part-timers to buy into the same health package that full timers have for about \$10 a month.

So am I exploited? Those of us in the academic world, particularly those of us who teach writing and literature, profess to know how to use language properly. But when we use terms like "exploited" and "migrant workers" to describe part-time college instructors, we are using language inaccurately. Furthermore, I believe it is *dangerous* to use such terms to describe a group of highly educated, upwardly mobile professionals, almost all of whom earn enough money to live in heated apartments, own cars, attend the theater, and dine out once or twice a month. Using these terms to describe

this intellectual elite might make us forget and ignore the truly exploited members of our labor force.

If most part-time instructors were to give the matter some thought, I hardly think that they could honestly refer to themselves as exploited. In fact, most would probably have to admit that they find part-time college teaching an enriching experience. Some choose part-time work so that they can dedicate themselves to another career or to their children. Even those who do not teach part-time by choice would probably admit that it can be more worthwhile (if not more profitable) than full-time teaching.

Let me again use my own experience as an example. In the fall of 1979, I taught at three different places. I taught two sections of an introductory composition course at a small, four-year college: most of my students were eighteen to twenty years old. I taught a literature course, through a program of another college, at a maximum security prison; eight of my ten students had committed murder. And I taught a business writing course at a computer software company; several of my students were \$40,000-a-year executives with advanced degrees. I could not have had a more interesting semester had I had a full-time teaching position. And for four months' work, I made more than \$4,000.

Many college instructors, both part-time and full-time, are calling for vast reforms to improve the plight of part-time instructors. But how much can we expect colleges to do? Should they immediately double the salaries of part-timers? Should all parttimers be hired full-time immediately? Any drastic reforms would require schools to make drastic budget cuts in other important areas and pass on massive tuition increases to their students. I do not believe that our colleges and universities have the responsibility to cater to a group of people who have made an unrealistic career choice. Most part-time instructors knew what they were getting into when they enrolled in M.A. and Ph.D. programs. If they do not find the marketplace conducive to their desires, they must change those desires. I do not think that they should expect the marketplace to make special arrangements to suit their needs.

I am not saying that the lot of part-timers should not be improved. Salaries should be improved. At some schools, payment for a three-credit course is \$850; this is a disgrace. Many part-timers have no health insurance; it would not be a major expense for colleges to allow part-time instructors to buy into *employee* health plans at a reduced rate. I would also like to see policies put into effect that would require department heads to guarantee part-timers a certain number of courses (no matter what happens with enrollment) at least two months before a semester begins so that part-timers are not suddenly stripped of income a day before classes begin. And I am behind all efforts to unionize part-timers to improve their situation.

But I feel that it is both inaccurate and dangerous to use terms like "exploitation" to refer to this group of middle-class professionals. If we do, we might forget what real exploitation is. We might forget about the plight of nonunion textile workers in Mississippi, of coal miners in Appalachia, of Chicano migrant farmers in California. We might forget about young blacks and laid-off auto workers whose employment problems are far more serious than those of part-time college instructors. And to consider the increased use of part-time instructors "the major scandal in higher education today" is to downgrade other more pressing problems, like the problems that the recent budget cuts are creating on our campuses, the problems created by the exploitation of college athletes, and the problems that arise when college graduates who cannot read, write, or think are let loose in the job market. Let's put the problems faced by part-time instructors in their proper perspective.

Notes

¹Susan Blank and Beth Greenberg. "Living at the bottom." *WPA*, 5 (Fall 1981), 9.

²Donald McQuade. "The case of the migrant workers." *WPA*, 5 (Fall 1981), 29.

³Wayne C. Booth. "A cheap, efficient, challenging, sure-fire and obvious device for combatting the major scandal in higher education today." *WPA*, 5 (Fall, 1981), 35.

⁴The former part-time instructors who wrote the articles in the *WPA* about the plight of part-timers seem to have done rather well. Susan Blank is now a writer and editor with Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation. Beth Greenberg teaches English in a New York high school. Wayne C. Booth teaches full-time at the University of Chicago. See "Notes on contributors." *WPA*, 5 (Fall 1981), 41-42.